THE POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE MEREDITH

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BY

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TO THE MEMORY OF

THEODORE LLEWELYN DAVIES

WHO LOVED THESE POEMS

PREFACE

It is my first duty to acknowledge the help in composing this book which I have received from several quarters. I heartily thank those friends who have made suggestions to me in conversation; but more particularly those who have so kindly gone through the book in MS. or in proof; and most of all, Mr. Desmond MacCarthy for valuable additions to my ideas inserted wholesale, especially in the first chapter. But I am equally indebted, though in a different way, to two others, whose conversation has for several years been influencing my thought and feeling on the subjects here treated. I mean, first, Mr. Meredith himself, who has not, however, in the official sense 'inspired' these pages, or seen them before publication. Secondly, I mean the friend to whose memory the book is dedicated; it was he who

most of all helped me to feel the spirit of the poems.

I am deeply grateful to Mr. Meredith and his publishers for the permission, not merely to make such long and frequent quotations in the text, but to reprint at the end of the volume the *Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn*, not easily accessible elsewhere.

CHELSEA, *Jan.* 1906.

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NOTE ON EDITIONS

WHERE TO FIND THE POEMS

THE *Selected Poems* have been well chosen. This little white-and-grey volume will long continue to attach the affections of all who make through it their first acquaintance with Mr. Meredith's poetry.

But, portable as it is and serviceable, it has now a rival in the red two-volume Pocket Edition of the *Poems*. This is the standard edition at present, uniform with the current edition of the novels. This collection can be obtained in two sizes, either in this Pocket Edition of 1903, or in the Library Edition of 1898, the text of which is identical with that of the Pocket Edition, even to the numbering of the pages. *Wherever in the notes of this book I give the name of a poem without reference to the volume in which it occurs, that poem will be found in these two red volumes* (*Library or Pocket Edition*).

But those volumes are not a complete collection. In the first place they contain none of the youthful poems of 1851, and only some of the poems of the edition of 1862 (published in that year under the title *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside*). The reader can find the Juvenilia of 1851 and the remainder of the poems of 1862 (except the *Patriot Engineer*) reprinted in the (limited)

Collected Edition of Mr. Meredith's works (vol. iii. of the Poems).

But there is another and more important class not included in the two-volume Library and Pocket Edition,—that is the recent poems. Of these there are two separate volumes: *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History* (1898), which include the earlier poem *France, December* 1870, written in that month. And lastly, there is the volume of philosophic poetry, entitled *A Reading of Life* (1901).

INTRODUCTION

If the gods showed their love for Shelley by causing him to die young, they have shown their love for Mr. Meredith in a more satisfactory manner, by leaving him to receive from us in old age the homage that was due to him from our grandfathers.

The influence, wide and yet more deep, which his works exert among the present generation, has been spread by two separate movements, of which the second has not yet reached its full development. Late in his life the general public discovered his novels; in his old age, it is beginning to do justice to his poems.

It is the poems which are the subject of this book. It has seemed to me that there is room for a more complete study of them than any that has yet appeared,[1] partly because their literary

[1] Existing works on Mr. Meredith's poetry are Professor Dowden's essay in his volume entitled *New Studies in Literature*, 1895; parts of Richard Le Gallienne's *George Meredith: Some Characteristics*, 1900, which contains a useful bibliography at the end (not of course up to date now). I would call special

value has not yet been so generally recognised or even so closely examined as that of the novels; partly because Mr. Meredith's religion, philosophy and ethics, which inspire and illuminate his novels, are expressed more fully and in more exact terms in his poems. Many of these are by nature didactic, and not only invite but require exposition and debate.

The first two chapters of this book are chiefly concerned with style, and the last two with content. But in first-rate literature, style and content cannot be distinguished from each other; the closer the analysis is made, the more indistinguishable do they prove to be. For this reason, as well as on account of my own poverty of expression, I have tried as far as possible to let the poems speak for themselves. The peculiar value of George Meredith as philosopher and teacher lies in his power to haunt the imagination with phrases that can never be expelled, and to set up before the mind's eye images of such power and beauty that the soul can never forget them or become wholly faithless to

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attention to articles by Miss Stawell in the *International Journal of Ethics* April 1902, and by the Rev. J. Moffat in the *Hibbert Journal*, July 1905. I am sorry that Mr. F. Cornford's excellent lecture on *Mr. Meredith's Poems*, delivered at the Working Men's College, 1903, has been only privately printed. Some passages in this book are taken from two articles by the author published in the *Independent Review*, July 1904 and 1905.

their ideal. The bald statements which I shall often be obliged to make in my own words of Mr. Meredith's view of life may sound as unattractive as other forms of dogmatism, or seem as vague as other generalisations. But in his poetry, these doctrines, like the vapours at sunrise, take colour and glow.

English poetry is not all of one type, and cannot therefore all be judged by one standard. We can compare Shelley and Browning no more and no less than we can compare a rose and a waterfall. Poetry is like religion in many things, but in nothing more than in the variety of its types and in the personal nature of its appeal. Voltaire, whatever he intended, never praised us English better than when he said that we had a hundred religions. To-day we can likewise boast that we have a hundred kinds of poetry. Of these kinds Mr. Meredith has created one. Of its relative value compared to the work of other famous men I offer no opinion. It will be enough for me if I can help a little to make clear where lies the strength and where the weakness of these poems. Of their absolute value I feel assured; of their relative value, time and abler critics must judge.

Long time must pass before even those who take pleasure in 'placing' poets can finally place Mr. Meredith. For his poems, which certainly require study, are only just beginning to receive it from

the public, although it is now more than forty years since Mr. Swinburne wrote of him as 'one of the three or four poets now alive whose work, perfect or imperfect, is always as noble in design as it is often faultless in result.'[1] When these words were written, Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold and Rossetti were all living. To-day only the author and the subject of this high eulogy remain.

When Mr. Meredith's work comes up for judgment by a distant posterity, novels and poems will be taken into account together. His poems are not the product of one side of his nature, and his novels of another. The more carefully we read them both, the clearer it becomes that the novels are the work of the poet, and the poems the work of the novelist. No other novels are so lyrical in spirit, no other poems so richly endowed with a novelist's insight into character and emotion. In both we get, though in different degrees, the same ethical and philosophical ideas, the same intricate psychology, the same appeal to the intellectual in us, the same wealth of imagination, the same perpetual torrent of metaphor, illuminated by flashes of the same exquisite beauty, varied by darts of the same critical but kindly humour, troubled by the

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[1] *The Spectator*, June 7, 1862 (reprinted in Le Gallienne's *George Meredith*, bibliography, p. xxv.).

same faults of uncouth and obscure expression. If, in the time to come, he is thought worthy to be matched with the great ones of old, it is both as novelist and poet that he will contend in the dateless Olympiad, in which the victors are many, and the palms are ever awarded afresh.

CHAPTER I

THE POET

It is the characteristic of George Meredith as a writer both of prose and verse, that poetical inspiration and intellectual power are developed in him each to the same degree. In most writers, one is the handmaid of the other. But in Mr. Meredith they contend or unite on equal terms. It is partly because his verse has these two cardinal functions instead of one, that his poems have such variety. Not merely are some very much better than others (that could be said of the works of any of our great English poets); but some have this kind of merit, and some that. For Mr. Meredith's inventive powers are perpetually at work to find ever new methods by which the imagination and the intellect can be combined, to the advantage of the one, or of the other, or at times equally of both. To name three or four of his most famous poems is to illustrate a number of different ways in which he has achieved success. *Love in the Valley* is a song of life's morning: the

feeling is simple, and so is the music to suit. In *Modern Love* it is difficult to say whether the subtlety and realism of the psychology, the grandeur of the tragic feeling, or the wealth of poetical power and imagination contributes most to the effect of the whole. These two poems, though they contain new elements and combinations, run sufficiently on old lines to be compared to the world's accepted masterpieces according to standards already established. But then in the *Hymn to Colour*, which will yield to few rivals in point of beauty or of art, we have a revolutionary art and a strange new beauty. Very different, again, from any of these, are the lyrical and intellectual novelties that constitute the charm and force of the *Day of the Daughter of Hades*. But there is yet another class of poems, where beauty of sound and even of phrase are sacrificed to vivid compression of meaning, as in much of the *Woods of Westermain*; although here and there, throughout, lines and passages of great beauty will survive the process and remain to flavour the whole. Finally, in some few pieces, art itself, which rules in far the greater portion of his work, flings the reins on to the necks of a headlong inspiration and a galloping intellect.

But all his poems, widely different as they are from one another, are marked by certain qualities peculiarly his own, which are present both when

his work is manifestly imperfect and when it fulfils the conditions of complete success. These qualities are closely connected one with another; they are merely the different aspects of one personality. But it will be convenient to make a somewhat arbitrary analysis, and to discuss the following points of his style:—the richness of his imagination; his use of the metaphor as an appeal directed more to the mind than to the eyes and ears; the rapid succession of his metaphors; his compression, his habit of weeding out the unessential and commonplace; the sleepless activity of his intellect; and lastly, the haunting quality of his phrases.

Fertility of imagination is one of the greatest qualities in a poet, and it is the most obvious of all Mr. Meredith's powers. In the *Shaving of Shagpat* his imagination breaks loose upon the sky, like Karaz mounted on the horse Garraveen, riots through heaven and earth and fairyland, and challenges the gorgeous East in its own genie-guarded chambers of luxurious magic to show a greater wealth of inventive fancy. It is his imagination that makes his psychological novels so very different from those of other great psychologists; in the midst of exact dissection, he bursts into the impetuous splendour of poetry. Tolstoi occasionally uses the metaphor, but only to give vividness and exactness to this analysis; for

instance, he says that Nekhliudof's conscience was still struggling like a wounded bird in a game-bag. But in the *Tragic Comedians* Mr. Meredith compares the state of the mighty Alvan's frustrated soul to 'some great cathedral organ foully handled in the night by demons.' There the poet speaks. Whenever he fails, it is not through want, but through excess of imagination; his metaphors sometimes strive, one on the back of another, like fierce animals in a pit, and deal each other dismembering wounds in the struggle for existence. But in his more fortunate passages, where order reigns, the fertility of his imagination gives him opportunity to exercise a splendid choice, so that perhaps no writer of verse or prose has metaphors more numerous, more incisive, or more beautiful in thought. Consider, for instance, the figure which he uses in his *Essay on Comedy* (p. 84) to illustrate the element of poetry, 'the infinite,' scattered through Carlyle's writings and perpetually flashing out on us from the middle of 'the finite,' the humorous or purely narrative passages:—

'Finite and infinite flash from one to the other with him, lending him a two-edged thought that peeps out of his peacefullest lines by fits, like the lantern of the fire-watcher at windows, going the rounds at night.'

To a writer possessed by an imagination so fertile, metaphor becomes the common mode of

speech. Now the peculiarity of Mr. Meredith's metaphors is that they are not sensuous but intellectual. He would not say—at any rate not at the same length as Shakespeare does in *Venus and Adonis*—

> Fully gently now she takes him by the hand,
> A lily prison'd in a gaol of snow,
> Or ivory in an alabaster band ;
> So white a friend engirts so white a foe.

Mr. Meredith uses the visual image of a metaphor, not primarily for the sake of giving a picture to the senses, but to make an idea strike root in the mind. Thus when Attila's veterans are described as

> Grain of threshing battle-dints,

the idea of that rough method of selecting the fittest is forcibly brought home. The hard hammering of swords on armour is made very present to the mind, but there is no distinct picture painted either of a threshing-floor or of a battle. Consider too, the grand prose-poem in *Beauchamp* (chap. ii.) about Napoleon's hat :—

'He said : "I don't care to win glory ; I know all about that: I've seen an old hat in the Louvre." And he would have had her to suppose that he had looked on the campaigning head-cover of Napoleon simply as a shocking bad, bald brown-rubbed old *tricorne* rather than as the nod

of extinction to thousands, the great orb of darkness, the still-trembling gloomy quiver—the brain of the lightnings of battles.'

None of the things to which the hat is compared —the 'nod,' the 'orb,' the 'quiver,' the 'brain'— need, or can be visualised like a metaphor of Keats. But they each flash into our minds an idea which a long paraphrase could not convey without spilling its essence.

This passage serves also to illustrate the other chief peculiarity of his use of metaphor, namely, that he drops each figure the moment that it has served his purpose. He extracts from it one analogy, the essential idea; then he is off to a new metaphor before the old one has lost its bloom from too much handling. And the reader must not linger on the old, if he is to understand the new. The picture must be seen, the idea read, in an intellectual flash of lightning. Above all, Mr. Meredith does not work out elaborate details of his comparison. He has no sympathy with that exercise of wit so fashionable among the Elizabethans, who dovetailed the two parts of a metaphor in as many ways as ingenious fancy could invent. The poets of that day would compose you passages of thirty or forty lines apiece on 'The Soul compared to a Virgin wooed in Marriage,' or to 'a River.' And Donne, though more elliptical in his style, was no less determined to show that the objects compared

resembled each other in more respects than the essential idea. Now the spirit in which Mr. Meredith's metaphors are conceived is exactly opposite to this. They are indeed sometimes far-fetched, but he always brings back a real prize and has had good reason for going so far afield. The analogy is always vitally real in one point; but there the likeness usually stops. You are meant to catch the first light that flies off the metaphor as it passes; but if you seize and cling to it, as though it were a post, you will be drowned in the flood of fresh metaphor that follows. To take an example from his verse, one out of a thousand—when he wishes to describe the somewhat helpless and pessimistic, though honourable, attitude of some latter-day sages in face of the swarming vulgarity of the undistinguished modern millions, and 'the swamp of their increase,'—he says—

> Philosophers . . . desponding view
> Your Many nourished, starved my brilliant few:
> Then flinging heels, as charioteers the reins,
> Dive down the fumy Ætna of their brains.
> Belated vessels on a rising sea,
> They seem: they pass!
> —But not Philosophy![1]

[1] *Reading of Life* (1901), p. 104: *Foresight and Patience.* Whenever, as here, I give the name of the volume in which the poem referred to occurs, the poem will *not* be found in the ordinary two-volumed Library or Pocket edition of the Poems. When the poem is in that collection, only the name of the poem itself is given (*e.g.* p. 21, note).

Here the Philosophers in one couplet fling up the reins like charioteers, and like Empedocles take the suicidal plunge (in this case down the volcano of their own imaginings); and in the next couplet we see them float like belated vessels on the new deluge. Taken in this quick sequence, the three figures give us a complete and forcible analysis of the mental state which he wishes to describe.

Passing on from his use of metaphor, we notice that another characteristic of Mr. Meredith is compression. He weeds out the commonplace and unessential. He will express nothing but the heart of the matter in hand. This quality has stood in the way of his popular success; there is no catering for those whose sole delight is in the good expression of 'what oft was thought'; and the demand made on the mind of the reader is considerable. Sometimes, indeed, he cuts out so many links as to create real and unpardonable obscurity. But the result of this chastening process, when he does not carry it too far, is an intellectual beauty and strength not otherwise to be obtained. In the didactic and philosophical parts of his work, if it is often obscuring, it is as often invaluable, because it does away with *longueurs* and the atmosphere of the pulpit, too well known in the case of other great masters of poetry when they ascend to preach. And in his purely narrative and poetical pieces, his richness

and aptness of imagery, combined with this habit of leaving out the unessential, renders his work, to those who consent to read poetry with thought and care, a rapid succession of pictures in outline flashed before the mind, suggesting novel ideas and moods, and producing, in the cumulative effect of a long poem, the highest kind of mental excitement. Two poems of this character are the *Day of the Daughter of Hades* and the *Nuptials of Attila*. I shall have more to say on these two pieces below, but here I must be content to give one short example of these effects, and I will take it from his best-abused poem, *Napoleon*.

> Cannon his name,
> Cannon his voice, he came.
> Who heard of him heard shaken hills,
> An earth at quake, to quiet stamped.
> Who looked on him beheld the will of wills.
> The driver of wild flocks where lions ramped.[1]

This is not a piece of Mr. Meredith's very best work, but it is worthy to stand as a type of his most individual method. It gives the poetical essence of Napoleon's career, with a wealth of apt metaphor, pruned and compressed into a haunting conciseness of phrase.

But perhaps the most distinctive quality of Mr. Meredith's work is the genuine thought

[1] *Odes in Contribution to French History* (1898), p. 21: *Napoleon*.

present in almost every verse. To apply to himself one of his own phrases, he is 'inveterate of brain.' Intellectual quality is equally constant in his least successful poetry and in his best. His sense of the poetical sometimes nods, his sense of the lucid often, but the vigour of his intellect never. And if the success with which he disengages his meaning from the words is more incomplete than that of other poets, it is generally because he has more meaning to evolve. As in some of Michael Angelo's statues, the Titan is only half-way out of the marble. But it is a Titan and not a ballet-girl. The mere vision of his mightiness coming out suggests more than a complete Canova.

His poems, as Coleridge said of the works of Donne, are—

> Wit's forge and fire-blast, meaning's press and screw.

And yet in one way, as I have already said, Donne and the 'Metaphysical School' of poets are at the very opposite pole to him. For they are always seeking something strange, and generally finding something unimportant, to say; and then they twist it into a thousand fantastic shapes. In fact they have not enough iron for their forge, nor enough grist for their mill. Now Mr. Meredith is furthest of all poets from sympathy with such 'conceits,' because he has no need to resort to them for matter. Both his imagination and his

intellect are so richly productive that he is not compelled, like Donne, to

> Wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots.'

Having so very many things to say, he takes the shortest way to say each of them. Hence he is often difficult, but never artificial.

For the same reason his failures are often irritating, but never dull. Because he always has new and valuable ideas to convey, his wastage is never utter wastage, like so much of Wordsworth and others—at least if we except two or three long passages (and only two or three) which are so obscure that it is nearly impossible to discern even their general drift. And while for this reason there is little that is wholly valueless, his average work and his best work gain immensely even as literature from being 'the vessel of the thought.' If poetry is a criticism of life, and not merely 'a rhapsody of words,' the value of intellect in poetry is immense.

The combined result of these characteristics of his style, which I have attempted to analyse, is his power to haunt the memory and imagination with a phrase, a line, a passage. The other poet who haunts us with phrases sometimes more captivating than the smoothest and most classic melody, is William Blake. Blake, who had little other poetical equipment, possessed this power in a very

high degree; he could raise a ghost by stringing together a few words in doggrel metre. The essence of one of his phrases can never be translated into other words. Blake seems to go to the bottom of the soul, or sometimes even below the depths, into unknown subterraneous regions. One could scarcely keep sane if one lived for long in Blakeland; it is a country to visit, not a home. But Meredith is in the middle of the heart of things. He unites sanity to hauntingness, and 'homelier makes the far.'

In consequence of his combined intellectual and imaginative power, the reader must be prepared for the close neighbourhood, in the same poem and even in the same stanza, of very different aims and qualities; a few lines of consummate beauty—the majestic or sheer lyrical—are followed by some passage of close thought or subtle psychology. Sometimes, at his best, he will make one and the same passage a masterpiece both of poetry and of intellect. This is one of the means by which he so often triumphs in a new field of his own discovery. But readers of books are little accustomed to this admixture; it bewilders them; they look to have beauty, psychology and ethics served up to them under separate covers. At least only on such an hypothesis can one explain the comparative in-

difference of the public to such a work as *Modern Love*.

Since that poem, by its union of narrative and psychological interest with poetry, by its admixture of social comedy with human tragedy, stands nearer to the novels than most of his other verse, it will perhaps be well to take it first in the order of our examination.

The merit of *Modern Love* lies in no small degree in its variety. Psychology, comedy, tragedy, irony, philosophy, and beauty follow upon each other's heels in such quick succession, that scarcely, except by a certain greater master, has a single tune been played upon so many stops. Yet the whole poem is one instrument, an artistic construction of perfect unity. Very different from this instrument, is the 'penny-whistle' with its 'two stops,' on which he played his Richard and Lucy [1] and his *Love in the Valley*, for our delight, to keep alive in the highest literature the simple heart of young love.

Modern Love stands in contrast with that other sonnet sequence [2] of his contemporary and friend,

[1] *Richard Feverel*, chap. xix., 'A Diversion played on a Penny Whistle.'

[2] The divisions of *Modern Love* are not properly sonnets, as they contain sixteen lines each; but as several critics, including Mr. Swinburne, have consented to speak of them as 'sonnets' I do so for convenience. They are at least closely analogous to the sonnet form.

Rossetti. The *House of Life* holds us by its oneness, *Modern Love* by its variety: the former stands or falls by the cumulative effect of its reiterated note of all-absorbing love; the latter presents a map of all the passions and moods that spring from, surround, or militate against love, and all the comedy that is the daily accompaniment of the tragedy of two souls. All the real emotions of life are put down in Mr. Meredith's great poem, as literally as in his novels. For 'life, some think, is worthy of the Muse'; and in this case, at least, the Muse has lost nothing by keeping such company. 'Praise or blame should be thoughtful, serious, careful,' wrote Mr. Swinburne in 1862, 'when applied to a work of such subtle strength, such depth of delicate power, such passionate and various beauty, as the leading poem of Mr. Meredith's volume [*Modern Love*]: in some points, as it seems to me (and in this opinion I know that I have weightier judgments than my own to back me) a poem above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author.'[1]

The story concerns a man and wife who loved each other once, but have ceased to love. It is not easy to name a writer who can, like Mr. Meredith in this poem, tell, with harrowing psychological detail, the most maddening of all forms of tragedy,

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[1] *Spectator*, June 7, 1862.

the growing up of evil where good was planted, and the springing of division out of the sacred heart of love,—and yet never let the tale decline from the majestic heights of poetry. Here is one of our own modern 'problems' treated, like some ancient tragedy, with the same kind of spiritual and intellectual beauty as saves *Othello* from being morbid, and *Hamlet* from being decadent. Perhaps the secret is that the author, who after his usual fashion at once pitifully understands and pitilessly exposes the victims of his creation, himself through it all *believes in love*. The cynical philosophy of the philandering episode in the middle of the poem, while it relieves the tragedy by affording the reader much intellectual amusement, is a mood of the puppet's, not of the author's. Behind the clash of intellectual discords, behind the grand harmonies of the tragic climax, is half heard the 'penny-whistle' with its 'two stops,' the tune of Richard and Lucy, faintly but incessantly sounding off distant enchanted waters.

> He probed from hell to hell
> Of human passions, but of love deflowered
> His wisdom was not.'[1]

In the first sonnet we are plunged into the depth of the situation. The love between husband and wife is dying, not without slow, silent agony,

[1] *The Spirit of Shakespeare.*

which is most cruelly and monotonously alive in the long hours when 'the midnight sobs around love's ghost.'

> By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
> That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
> The strange low sobs that shook their common bed,
> Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
> And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
> Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
> Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away
> With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
> Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
> Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
> Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
> Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
> By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
> Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
> Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
> Each wishing for the sword that severs all.—(I.)

If, as is sometimes said, this sudden beginning in the middle of the story, without a note of introduction or explanation, makes some demand on the intelligence of the reader, on the other hand clear gain is thereby made both in dignity and in power.

In daylight, the commonplace mixes with the tragic, and the active intellect with self-devouring emotion. Sonnets II.-XIX. represent the daily inward ragings of the husband, still tortured by love, which in him is not yet either dead or fixed on any other object. He watches the wife's relations with another. He has no fixed feeling; love,

jealousy, hate (see Sonnet IX.), and love again, chase each other through his mind.

> Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,
> See that I am drawn to her even now!
> It cannot be such harm on her cool brow
> To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!
> But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well
> I claim a star whose light is overcast:
> I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.
> The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell![1]—(III.)

When a man is thus 'a shuddering heap of pain,' what philosophy he has to guide him in saner moments is apt to seem to him the enemy; for as it has no relation to his passions, it seems inhuman. This complicated psychological idea is rendered simple and is exalted into the region of pure poetry by the marvellous art of the following passage:—

> Cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent,
> Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe:
> Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison-bars,
> Is always watching with a wondering hate.
> Not till the fire is dying in the grate,
> Look we for any kinship with the stars.—(IV.)

Already he is beginning to feel himself degenerating under this prolonged agony:—

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[1] The husband is sometimes spoken of in the third person as 'he,' but sometimes (first in Sonnet III.) he speaks in the first person. Whenever the word 'I' occurs, it is the husband speaking.

> But, no : we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped :
> The God once filled them with his mellow breath ;
> And they were music till he flung them down,
> Used ! used ! Hear now the discord-loving clown
> Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death !
> I do not know myself without thee more :
> In this unholy battle I grow base :
> If the same soul be under the same face,
> Speak, and a taste of that old time restore !—(VIII.)

But his degeneration has not yet taken form. And meanwhile he can boast to his conscience that he has honestly faced fact, and that he has refused to inherit a fool's paradise :—

> Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
> The facts of life, you still had seen me go
> With hindward feather and with forward toe,
> Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince !—(X.)

Nor will he consent to forget the golden past, though the memory of it is his agony, for—

> If I drink oblivion of a day
> So shorten I the stature of my soul.—(XII.)

The terrible memories throng upon them both, when—

> Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee
> Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,
> And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing
> Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.—(XI.)

But the climax of merciless memory is in Sonnet XVI. :—

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,
When in the firelight steadily aglow,
Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow
Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower
That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat
As lovers to whom Time is whispering.
From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:
The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.
Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
With us, and of it was our talk. 'Ah, yes!
Love dies!' I said: I never thought it less.
She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.
Then when the fire domed blackening, I found
Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:—
Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

Much complaint is made, and too often justly, of the want of smooth, continuous melody in Mr. Meredith's verse; but it is possible to exaggerate the importance of this as if it were the sole source of poetic beauty. There are other ways and means. This Sonnet XVI. is a case in point. It is not so continuously melodious in liquid flow of sound as Sonnet XLVII. (pp. 31-32 below); but I doubt if it is less beautiful. The realism of the scene and the passion of the narrator, which cannot here be given without some break in the melodious quality of the verse, add positively to its poetical beauty. But one line stands out from the rest—

As lovers to whom Time is whispering,—

a phrase that enriches our language and our thought.

In Sonnets XVIII.-XIX. the husband seeks relief for himself (and successfully finds it for the reader) in a humorous cynicism, which comes upon him first as he is watching

> A country merry-making on the green,
> Fair space for signal shakings of the leg.

Watching the bumpkins dance, Hodge with Audrey, he sees in them a caricature of his own past happiness :—

> What life was that I lived? The life of these?
> Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near.
> They must, I think, be wiser than I am;
> They have the secret of the bull and lamb.
> 'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer.—(XVIII.)

The sight of the village idiot rubbing his hands, with relish of life as it appears to his poor brain, calls out the same vein of humour in our cynic :—

> If any state be enviable on earth,
> 'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,
> Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
> In a queer sort of meditative mirth.

In this desperate mood, degenerated by misery, he seeks 'distraction.' Sonnets XX.-XXXIX. contain the episode of 'My Lady,'[1] an old flame of his youth. In the course of his relations with her, he

[1] 'My Lady,' or 'Lady,' always means this third person, while 'Madam' means his wife. With this key the reader will easily follow the episode through its windings.

falls very low—low enough at one time to be coldly cruel in presence of his wife's obvious agony (XXXIV.). He tries to keep up his self-respect by telling himself that conscious sin is at least better than hypocrisy; to which well-worn theory he gives a novel and most amusing expression :—

> I am not of those miserable males
> Who sniff at vice, and, daring not to snap,
> Do therefore hope for heaven. I take the hap
> Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails,
> Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,
> I know the devil has sufficient weight
> To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.
> Besides, he's damned. That man I do suspect
> A coward, who would burden the poor deuce
> With what ensues from his own slipperiness.—(XX.)

His intellectual powers, too, are called out by My Lady, though always on a cynical plane. But cynics often tell a good deal of truth :—

> This golden head has wit in it. I live
> Again, and a far higher life, near her.
> Some women like a young philosopher;
> Perchance because he is diminutive.
> For woman's manly god must not exceed
> Proportions of the natural nursing size.
> Great poets and great sages draw no prize
> With women: but the little lap-dog breed,
> Who can be hugged, or on a mantel-piece
> Perched up for adoration, these obtain
> Her homage. And of this we men are vain?
> Of this! 'Tis ordered for the world's increase!—(XXXI.)

But their talks, though highly entertaining,

never reach the point of true wisdom, and he has not fallen so far as to be ignorant of this. He is aware of

> One restless corner of my heart or head,
> That holds a dying something never dead.—(XXXII.)

His soul is utterly unsatisfied with his new love :—

> I cannot be at peace
> In having Love upon a mortal lease.
> I cannot take the woman at her worth!
> Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
> Our human nakedness, and could endow
> With spiritual splendour a white brow
> That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?
> A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
> Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
> But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
> And eat our pot of honey on the grave.—(XXIX.)

These last two terrible lines show that in fact he is not content so to sit.

Meanwhile his wife is coming round to him and makes advances to an explanation :—

> Madam would speak with me. So, now it comes :
> The Deluge or else Fire!—(XXXIV.)

But he freezes her up with polite banter. It is his worst crime, and he soon pays the penalty :—

> It is no vulgar nature I have wived.
> Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound
> Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swooned
> And not a thought of vengeance had survived
> . . . . . .

O have a care of natures that are mute !
. . . . . .
She is not one
Long to endure this torpidly, and shun
The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand.—(XXXV.)

So in Sonnet XXXIX. the climax and end of the philandering episode is reached. He is in the moonlit wood making love to My Lady :—

She yields : my Lady in her noblest mood
Has yielded : she, my golden-crownëd rose !
The bride of every sense ! more sweet than those
Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood.
O visage of still music in the sky !
Soft moon ! I feel thy song, my fairest friend !

Suddenly another couple appear :—

What two come here to mar this heavenly tune?
A man is one : the woman bears my name,
And honour. Their hands touch ! Am I still tame?
God, what a dancing spectre seems the moon !—(XXXIX.)

At once he has to ask himself—

Can I love one,
And yet be jealous of another? None
Commits such folly. Terrible Love, I ween,
Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave
The lightless seas of selfishness amain.

He finds that

The dread that my old love may be alive,
Has seized my nursling new love by the throat.—(XL)

And so the shock of the scene effects a revolution in the relations of husband and wife. The better

part of each again resumes its sway. They agree to forgive one another and renew their bond, though not without secret misgivings that

> We two have taken up a lifeless vow
> To rob a living passion : dust for fire !—(XLI.)

The failure and success of this great attempt is set forth in the last ten sonnets, where we find the culmination of the poetical and spiritual power of the piece. The baser elements are, if not quite exorcised (XLV.-XLVI.), at least relegated to the background. Love, pity, tragedy, and beauty occupy the field, and seldom have they found higher expression. It is the spiritual atmosphere in which the man and woman move at the end of the poem, which justifies the remarkable sonnet called *Promise in Disturbance*, which Mr. Meredith has now prefixed to the series.

The renewal of perfect love between husband and wife is impossible. They seek refuge from this truth in the darkness of each other's arms ; but there the barren fact is all the more apparent. Their kisses, being 'unblest' by love, only serve to separate them. He learns this and wanders disconsolate by the seashore :—

> Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like,
> Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave !
> Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave ;
> Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,

And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:
In hearing of the ocean, and in sight
Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.
If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
I never could have made it half so sure,
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!
'Tis morning: but no morning can restore
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.—(XLIII.)

He feels that Pity, not Love, now binds him to his wife:—

They say, that Pity in Love's service dwells,
A porter at the rosy temple's gate.
I missed him going: but it is my fate
To come upon him now beside his wells;
Whereby I know that I Love's temple leave,
And that the purple doors have closed behind.—(XLIV.)

In the metaphorical poetry in praise of the Courts of Love, these lines will surely hold no mean place.

Then after two exquisite pieces of psychological narrative (XLV.-XLVI.) comes the great sonnet that begins—

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky.

It is a haven of peace before the storm:—

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
And in the osier-isle we heard them noise.
We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye:

But in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband and my bride.
Love that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!
The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.
Love that had robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave,
Where I have seen across the twilight wave
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.[1]—(XLVII.)

And so:—

I looked for peace, and thought it near.
Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each.
We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.
Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear.

For suddenly he finds that 'this woman, O, this agony in flesh!' has fled, with the quixotic desire to leave him free to return to My Lady. He is in no humour to commit so base a treachery, and bursts out with a cry, even more characteristic of the author than of the man in whose mouth he puts it:—

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,
Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
Utterly this fair garden we might win.

He follows his wife and finds her.

---

[1] Of this sonnet Mr. Swinburne said, 'a more perfect piece of writing no man alive has ever turned out.' He added that lines 5-7 are 'the grandest perhaps of the book.'

He found her by the ocean's moaning verge,
Nor any wicked change in her discerned ;
And she believed his old love had returned,
Which was her exultation, and her scourge.
She took his hand, and walked with him, and seemed
The wife he sought, though shadow-like and dry.
She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh,
And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed.
She dared not say, 'This is my breast : look in.'
But there's a strength to help the desperate weak.
That night he learned how silence best can speak
The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin.
About the middle of the night her call
Was heard, and he came wondering to the bed.
'Now kiss me, dear ! it may be, now !' she said.
Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all.—(XLIX.)

She had given herself rest.

So ends the tale. There is but one more sonnet, where the poet repeats in brief the lamentable history of these two, and then, in the last lines of all, speaks of the abortive but majestic force of so much in human life, finding therefor words worthy of a Greek tragedian, and stamping it into our memories by the use of an ancient metaphor. But the form which he has given to that metaphor, no one but himself would have devised, and it has been surpassed by no other form in the literature of the world :—

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat :
The union of this ever-diverse pair !
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,

They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life!—
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!—(L.)

I fear that this rough outline and these broken quotations can give little idea of the splendour and the art of this poem. For, as Mr. Swinburne said long ago, 'Take almost any sonnet at random out of this series, and let any man qualified to judge for himself of metre, choice of expression, and splendid language, decide on its claims. And, after all, the test will be unfair, except as regards metrical or pictorial merit; every section of the great progressive poem being connected with the others by links of the finest and most studied workmanship.'[1] But if any one shall be induced by what I have written and quoted to make a more careful study of *Modern Love*, he will certainly come to the conclusion that when people declare Mr. Meredith's work to be flung at the head of the public, carelessly designed, crude and wanting in the last touches of per-

[1] *Spectator*, June 7, 1862.

fected art, this criticism has no truth whatever in reference to his longest and most important poem. And it has been the habit, in considering other poets, to give most attention to their highest achievements.

Every true poet adds something new and memorable to the love-poetry of the race, and enriches the joy of lovers with some treasure of his own device. For this we look, not to *Modern Love*, but to *Love in the Valley*.

'Away with Systems! Away with a corrupt World! Let us breathe the air of the Enchanted Island.

'Golden lie the meadows: golden run the streams; red gold is on the pine-stems. The sun is coming down to earth, and walks the fields and the waters.

. . . . . .

'Here, secluded from vexed shores, the prince and princess of the island meet: here like darkling nightingales they sit, and into eyes and ears and hands pour endless ever-fresh treasures of their souls.'[1]

In its first form, as the youthful poem published humbly enough among the *Pastorals* in the volume

[1] *Richard Feverel*, chap. xix.

of 1851,[1] *Love in the Valley* was liquid, simple, and in places very childish; such a poem as a Richard of genius might have written to Lucy. But in riper years, with sureness of judgment and exquisiteness of art, he took this crude, lovable thing, removed all that was immature, more than doubled it in length, and so built up, on a happy inspiration of boyhood, his great lyric of twenty-six stanzas, any one of which it would be difficult to say is less rich than its neighbours. But the greatest addition that he made was a sense of depth and mystery which takes nothing from the ardour and adds much to the value of the dawn of love. For instance, in 1851 he could not have written such a verse as this—

> All the girls are out with their baskets for the primrose;
> Up lanes, woods through, they troop in joyful bands.
> My sweet leads: she knows not why, but now she loiters,
> Eyes the bent anemones, and hangs her hands.
> Such a look will tell that the violets are peeping,
> Coming the rose: and unaware a cry
> Springs in her bosom for odours and for colour,
> Covert and the nightingale; she knows not why.

On the other hand, the early edition does contain the verse, which now stands, only very slightly altered, thus:—

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[1] This first version can be found either in edition of 1851, or in the Limited Collected Edition (vol. iii. of Poems), where however, it is printed as a separate poem, not grouped under the *Pastorals*.

When her mother tends her before the laughing mirror,
Tying up her laces, looping up her hair,
Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded,
More love should I have, and much less care.
When her mother tends her before the lighted mirror,
Loosening her laces, combing down her curls,
Often she thinks, were this wild thing wedded,
I should miss but one for many boys and girls.

'The stanzas beginning "When her mother tends her,"' wrote Stevenson, 'haunted me and made me drunk like wine.'[1]

The only other one of the original verses which has survived in something like its original form, ran as follows—

When at dawn she wakens, and her fair face gazes
Out on the weather thro' the window panes,
Beauteous she looks! like a white water-lily
Bursting out of bud on the rippled river plains.
When from bed she rises clothed from neck to ankle
In her long nightgown, sweet as boughs of May,
Beauteous she looks! like a tall garden lily
Pure from the night and perfect for the day!

The first four lines have now been altered to—

When at dawn she sighs, and like an infant to the window
Turns grave eyes craving light, released from dreams,
Beautiful she looks, like a white water-lily
Bursting out of bud in havens of the streams.

Perhaps it is better so, and yet one may be sorry that 'the rippled river plains' should 'suffer not thinking on.'

---

[1] *Letters of R. L. Stevenson*, ii. 324: April 14, 1894, to W. B. Yeats.

Among love-poems, this one is distinguished by an intimate and happy blending of the moods of nature with the thoughts of love. Indeed it is not easy to say whether it should be counted as a love-poem or as a poem of nature; its force derives from the intimate union of the two themes, and the author would not wish us to divide them. It is the finest expression he has found for unadulterated joy in the beauty and vitality of earth, in the sap that runs in our veins through 'blood, brain and spirit.'

It is always Mr. Meredith's inspiration as a nature poet to catch the spirit that dwells in the place and hour:—

> Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping
> Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.
> Lone on the fir-branch, his rattle-note unvaried,
> Brooding o'er the gloom, spins the brown evejar.
> Darker grows the valley, more and more forgetting.[1]

It is the triumph of *Love in the Valley* to weld these varying moods of nature in with the imaginations of the lover.

> Heartless she is as the shadow in the meadows
> Flying to the hills on a blue and breezy noon.

Or take the following verse, where the poet is

[1] For a similar comprehension of the spirit of nature falling gradually to sleep after sunset, see the *Pastorals* in the volume of 1851, p. 92:

> Deeper the stillness hangs on every motion;
> Calmer the silence follows every call.

watching the dawn come up on a day before his mistress has yielded to him the secret of her heart :—

Happy happy time, when the white star hovers
Low over dim fields fresh with bloomy dew,
Near the face of dawn, that draws athwart the darkness,
Threading it with colour, like yewberries the yew.
Thicker crowd the shades as the grave East deepens
Glowing, and with crimson a long cloud swells.
Maiden still the morn is ; and strange she is, and secret ;
Strange her eyes ; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells.

May not these last two lines be classed among the great lines of English poetry ?

Or again, in another twilight dawn, while the rose-flush before sunrise 'drinks' the 'rayless' morning star, the skylark suggests a different thought of her :—

Mother of the dews, dark eye-lashed twilight,
Low-lidded twilight, o'er the valley's brim,
Rounding on thy breast sings the dew-delighted skylark,
Clear as though the dewdrops had their voice in him.
Hidden where the rose-flush drinks the rayless planet,
Fountain-full he pours the spraying fountain-showers.
Let me hear her laughter, I would have her ever
Cool as dew in twilight, the lark above the flowers.

In short, she is the incarnation of all things, the Goddess of young love's pantheism :—

she is what my heart first awaking
Whispered the world was ; morning light is she.
Love that so desires would fain keep her changeless ;
Fain would fling the net, and fain have her free.

The only key necessary to the complete under-

standing of the poem, is to perceive that in the course of it the farmer's year goes round through all its seasons. The eleventh stanza, beginning—

> All the girls are out with their baskets for the primrose,

is early spring. Then follow the midsummer pomps, in the fifteenth, or 'yellow' verse, that most extraordinary *tour de force*, and in the beautiful verses beginning 'Front door and back,' and 'Doves of the fir-wood.' Then we get the harvest—

> O the golden sheaf, the rustling treasure-armful!
> O the nutbrown tresses nodding interlaced!

Then at a leap, we are in mid-winter with the bare beech branches throwing shadows on the snow.

> Large and smoky red the sun's cold disk drops,
> Clipped by naked hills, on violet shaded snow:
> Eastward large and still lights up a bower of moonrise,
> Whence at her leisure steps the moon aglow.
> Nightlong on black print-branches our beech-tree
> Gazes in this whiteness: nightlong could I.
> Here may life on death or death on life be painted.
> Let me clasp her soul to know she cannot die!

Then at length comes the moment of love's climacteric:—

> Hither she comes; she comes to me; she lingers,
> Deepens her brown eyebrows, while in new surprise
> High rise the lashes in wonder of a stranger;
> Yet am I the light and living of her eyes.
> Something friends have told her fills her heart to brimming,
> Nets her in her blushes, and wounds her, and tames.—
> Sure of her haven, O like a dove alighting,
> Arms up, she dropped: our souls were in our names.

After that, the last three verses, certainly not the least, are the shout of expectancy for returning spring :—

Soon will she lie like a white frost sunrise.
  Yellow oats and brown wheat, barley pale as rye,
Long since your sheaves have yielded to the thresher,
  Felt the girdle loosened, seen the tresses fly.
Soon will she lie like a blood-red sunset.
  Swift with the to-morrow, green-winged Spring !
Sing from the South-West, bring her back the truants,
  Nightingale and swallow, song and dipping wing.

Soft new beech-leaves, up to beamy April
  Spreading bough on bough a primrose mountain, you
Lucid in the moon, raise lilies to the skyfields,
  Youngest green transfused in silver shining through :
Fairer than the lily, than the wild white cherry :
  Fair as in image my seraph love appears
Borne to me by dreams when dawn is at my eyelids :
  Fair as in the flesh she swims to me on tears.

Could I find a place to be alone with heaven,
  I would speak my heart out : heaven is my need.
Every woodland tree is flushing like the dogwood,
  Flashing like the whitebeam, swaying like the reed.
Flushing like the dogwood crimson in October ;
  Streaming like the flag-reed South-West blown ;
Flashing as in gusts the sudden-lighted whitebeam :
  All seem to know what is for heaven alone.

In the face of this poem, as nowhere else in Mr. Meredith's enchanted woods, criticism drops its weapons. One can only be thankful that so great an inspiration has been clothed in a form so nearly perfect.

Another poem, of a very different order, similarly has nature and love combined for its theme. *Juggling Jerry* gives us the pathos and humour and strength of the old English character that was nursed on the countryside. That character and that south country landscape are both very dear to Mr. Meredith, who was 'born in Hampshire in 1828';[1] they 'bind him fast with earth.' They are to him something of what Scotland was to Scott, what the Lakes were to Wordsworth. Among them the scene of all his English novels and poems is lovingly laid. On a heath, overlooking such a landscape, the old Juggler is dying in his old wife's arms, beside their old grey horse, while, as he shows her,

> Up goes the lark, as if all were jolly!
> . . . . . .
> We two were married, due and legal:
> Honest we've lived since we've been one.
> Lord! I could then jump like an eagle:
> You danced bright as a bit o' the sun.
> Birds in a May-bush we were! right merry!
> All night we kiss'd, we juggled all day.
> Joy was the heart of Juggling Jerry!
> Now from his old girl he's juggled away.
> . . . . . .
> Yonder came smells of the gorse, so nutty,
> Gold-like and warm: it's the prime of May.
> Better than mortar, brick and putty,
> Is God's house on a blowing day.

[1] *Who's Who*, sub. loc.

Lean me more up the mound ; now I feel it :
All the old heath-smells ! Ain't it strange ?
There's the world laughing, as if to conceal it,
But He's by us, juggling the change.

I mind it well, by the sea-beach lying,
Once—it's long gone—when two gulls we beheld,
Which, as the moon got up, were flying
Down a big wave that sparked and swelled.
Crack, went a gun : one fell : the second
Wheeled round him twice, and was off for new luck :
There in the dark her white wing beckon'd—
Drop me a kiss—I'm the bird dead-struck !

Among his other love poems we must class the sonnet beginning :—

Earth was not Earth before her sons appeared,
Nor Beauty Beauty ere young Love was born :
And thou when I lay hidden wast as morn
At city-windows, touching eyelids bleared ;
To none by her fresh wingedness endeared ;
Unwelcome unto revellers outworn.
I the last echoes of Diana's horn
In woodland heard, and saw thee come, and cheered.[1]

On the opposite page is a sonnet of a lover who has less hope, but who, as he watches his mistress, feels that spiritually he is in possession of 'her heavenliness,'

Beyond the senses, where such love as mine,
Such grace as hers, should the strange Fates withhold
Their starry more from her and me, unite.[2]

'Their starry more' is a phrase arrived at by

[1] *Appreciation.* [2] *Grace and Love.*

the weeding process of which I spoke above (p. 14). The foreshortening of the whole idea of the lover's dream of bliss down to these three expressive words, gives it reticence, dignity, and force.

If there is one subject that dominates Mr. Meredith's poetry, as the subject of men and women dominates that of Browning, it is nature. Scenes of nature introduce the philosophical poems, and perpetually recur to illustrate the narratives and ballads, while many of his pieces are ostensibly nothing but descriptions of earth and sky.[1] He excels in giving not merely the physical aspect of nature, but the spirit lurking beneath and expressed in her outward appearance. He watches to see the ghost of the place, he listens to catch the mood of the hour; this makes his nature poems more subtle, often more difficult, than most such poetry, but when once felt they are proportionately more satisfying, more inebriating. Here, for instance, is his rendering of the nightingales who answer each other on the edge of an

[1] I should like here to call particular attention to the volume called *Nature Poems of George Meredith* (Limited Edition, 1898), where the beautiful illustrations of Mr. William Hyde are a very real assistance to a full appreciation of Mr. Meredith's nature thoughts and fancies.

English wood, faintly heard in the sharp stillness of a *Night of Frost in May* :—

> In this shrill hush of quietude,
> The ear conceived a severing cry.
> Almost it let the sound elude,
> When chuckles three, a warble shy,
> From hazels of the garden came,
> Near by the crimson-windowed farm.
> They laid the trance on breath and frame,
> A prelude of the passion-charm.
>
> Then soon was heard, not sooner heard
> Than answered, doubled, trebled, more,
> Voice of an Eden in the bird
> Renewing with his pipe of four
> The sob : a troubled Eden, rich
> In throb of heart : unnumbered throats
> Flung upward at a fountain's pitch,
> The fervour of the four long notes,
> That on the fountain's pool subside,
> Exult and ruffle and upspring :
> Endless the crossing multiplied
> Of silver and of golden string.
> There chimed a bubbled underbrew
> With witch-wild spray of vocal dew.

These lines are very much open to criticism, but I doubt if they are not more closely descriptive of the nightingale than any other passage to be culled from English poetry. I will not further oppose the critic, except to ask him whether the effect could have been produced without the imperfections which he condemns. Compare the passage to Shelley's description of the nightingales :—

There the voluptuous nightingales,
Are awake through all the broad noonday,
When one with bliss or sadness fails,
And through the windless ivy-boughs,
Sick with sweet love, droops dying away
On its mate's music-panting bosom ;
Another from the swinging blossom,
Watching to catch the languid close
Of the last strain, then lifts on high
The wings of the weak melody,
Till some new strain of feeling bear
The song, and all the woods are mute.[1]

I do not wish to dispute which is the finer passage of the two, but I know which is most like the nightingale. Milton, Matthew Arnold, Shelley, Keats himself praise the nightingale's song ; Mr. Meredith gives it back to our memory. His words strike, in our brain and body, the very chords which last vibrated when last we listened to the bird.

But often he gives us nature in the stormier mood. Here is a description of the south-wester falling upon the woods after sunset, watched by one

who loves old hymning night,
And knows the Dryad voices well.

Not long the silence followed :
The voice that issues from thy breast,
O glorious South-West,
Along the gloom-horizon holloa'd ;

---

[1] *Prometheus Unbound*, Act ii. Sc. 2.

Warning the valleys with a mellow roar
Thro' flapping wings ; then, sharp the woodland bore
A shudder, and a noise of hands :
A thousand horns from some far vale
In ambush sounding on the gale.
Forth from the cloven sky came bands
Of revel-gathering spirits ; trooping down,
Some rode the tree-tops ; some on torn cloud-strips,
Burst screaming thro' the lighted town :
And scudding seaward, some fell on big ships :
Or mounting the sea-horses blew
Bright foam-flakes on the black review
Of heaving hulls and burying beaks.

Still on the farthest line, with out-puffed cheeks,
'Twixt dark and utter dark, the great wind drew
From heaven that disenchanted harmony
To join earth's laughter in the midnight blind :
Booming a distant chorus to the shrieks
Preluding him : then he,
His mantle streaming thunderingly behind,
Across the yellow realm of stiffened Day,
Shot thro' the woodland alleys signals three ;
And with the pressure of a sea,
Plunged broad upon the vale that under lay.' [1]

According to Mr. Meredith, we should love all changes of weather :—

'The taking of rain and sun alike befits men of our climate, and he who would have the secret of a strengthening intoxication must court the clouds of the South-west with a lover's blood.' [2]

The good walker Vernon's delight in the drench-

[1] *Spirit of Earth in Autumn*, see p. 227 below.
[2] *Egoist*, chap. xxvi.

ing rain is well remembered by readers of the *Egoist*. But still deeper in the heart of all who have truly read *Richard Feverel* (chap. xlii.) is the night-walk in the Rhineland forest through the roaring storm, which restores Richard to himself. It is one of Mr. Meredith's finest pictures of spiritual recovery by contact with the forces of Nature. But it has its rival and counterpart in the poem of *Earth and a Wedded Woman*. A woman of the people waits, sickening at home, for her soldier-husband at the wars. When the poem opens, drought is parching the land, as loneliness is parching her soul:

> She and Earth are one
> In withering unrevived.
> Rain! O the glad refresher of the grain!
> And welcome water-spouts, had we sweet rain!

The maidens of the village, free from care, bemoan her fate and revile the state of widowed marriage:

> Yet Grief would not change fates with such as they.
> They have not struck the roots which meet the fires
> Beneath, and bind us fast with Earth, to know
> The strength of her desires,
> The sternness of her woe.
> Rain! O the glad refresher of the grain!
> And welcome waterspouts, had we sweet rain!

At last the rain comes, and its coming awakens her again to hope and life.

Through night, with bedroom window wide for air,
Lay Susan tranced to hear all heaven descend:
And gurgling voices came of Earth, and rare,
Past flowerful, breathings, deeper than life's end,
From her heaved breast of sacred common mould;
Whereby this lone-laid wife was moved to feel
Unworded things and old
To her pained heart appeal.
Rain! O the glad refresher of the grain!
And down in deluges of blessed rain!

And in the last verse we have the scene of glad recovery in the morning sun.

At morn she stood to live for ear and sight,
Love sky or cloud, or rose or grasses drenched.
. . . . . .
Rain! O the glad refresher of the grain!
Thrice beauteous is our sunshine after rain!

To this scene we can compare the morning after that night storm in *Richard Feverel*:

'When he looked out from his trance on the breathing world, the small birds hopped and chirped: warm fresh sunlight was over all the hills. He was on the edge of the forest, entering a plain clothed with ripe corn under a spacious morning sky.'

The moral, human use to which Mr. Meredith puts the rain-storm is typical of an idea in his ethics, which lies so much at the heart of his poetry that I cannot omit to mention it in this chapter. He feels that it is in contact and sympathy with the moods of nature that man best

finds inspiration and strength for his own so different business. The face of our living mother, the Earth, has a language that appeals to the deepest in us. 'Unworded things and old' stir unremembered racial memories, and breathe some unshaped promise to the seed of man.[1] In the towns 'our battle urges'; but in the fields and woods we drink recovery to renew that battle: *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra.*

> Leave the uproar: at a leap
> Thou shalt strike a woodland path,
> Enter silence, not of sleep,
> Under shadows, not of wrath;
> Breath which is the spirit's bath,
> In the old Beginnings find.[2]

His poem *By the Rosanna*, as it thunders down the Stanzer Thal in Tyrol, preaches the doctrine in a jolly form, memorable to Alpinists in London:—

> How often will those long links of foam
> Cry to me in my English home,
> To nerve me, whenever I hear them bellow,
> Like the smack of the hand of a gallant fellow.[3]

---

[1] Richard Jefferies' *Story of my Heart* is a noble prose version of this idea, and is very comparable to Meredith in some of its spirit.

[2] *Nature and Life.*

[3] This poem can be found in the edition of 1862. Most of it is little more than a parody of Browning, but the beginning and end are both original and fine. The beginning is reprinted in the Limited Collected Edition of the works.

The love of nature and the close observation of her moods (though not yet of her deepest) lends a character to the boyish *Poems* of 1851 and divides some of them from the commonplace effusions of imaginative youth. Memorable among Juvenilia are the *Pastorals* in that volume, for they contain that original version of *Love in the Valley* of which I have spoken above (p. 36).—The other *Pastorals* are nature studies of south England, which might have shown the very wise in the year of the great Exhibition, that a new nature poet was at hand.

Heavily weighs the hot season, and drowses the darkening foliage,
Drooping with languor; the white cloud floats, but sails not, for windless
The blue heaven tents it; no lark singing up in its fleecy white valleys,
Up in its fairy white valleys, once feathered with minstrels; melodious
With the invisible joy that wakes dawn o'er the green fields of England.[1]

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[1] The Poems of 1851 have been reprinted in the Limited Collected Edition of Mr. Meredith's works, vol xxxi. (vol. iii. of the Poems). Among those worthy of more than a passing glance are the *South-West Wind in the Woodland* (clearly the origin of the *Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn*); *Will o' the Wisp; Daphne*, rich in imagination and poetic realism; and the *Song*, beginning 'Thou to me art such a spring,' especially the last verse.

Pardon has been extended to the obscurity of Mr. Meredith's novels, and of Browning's poems, because they tempt the appetite of the reader with the interest of the story. But Mr. Meredith, the poet, has not this claim upon the consideration of the general; he is chiefly distinguished as a lyrist and philosopher. And yet he has left a very varied though small assortment of the political, comic, narrative and historical.

The Patriot Engineer,[1] *England before the Storm*, *Aneurin's Harp*, *France* 1870, and *At the Close*,[2] together form a group of political poems that can be compared, both for likeness and difference, with those of Wordsworth; while *Manfred*, *Hernani*, and *Empedocles* give at its best the Meredithian satiric comedy, flavoured with the salt of philosophic wisdom.[3] As to narrative, one of his greatest works is the tale of the *Day of the Daughter of Hades*, adorned indeed with more lyrical beauty and philosophic meaning than is usual in poems that tell a story; while the *Song of Theodolinda*, and above all the *Nuptials of Attila*, illuminate the Dark Ages with the true touch of historical imagination.

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[1] This poem can only be found in the edition of 1862. Personally I regret that it has not been reprinted, although its great merits are those of 'beer,' not of 'wine.'

[2] *Reading of Life* (1901), p. 70.

[3] See pp. 166-7, below.

At the opening of the great poem that celebrates his *Nuptials*, Attila is camped near the Danube, tired for awhile of world-destruction.

> Flat as to an eagle's eye,
> Earth hung under Attila.
> Sign for carnage gave he none.
> In the peace of his disdain,
> Sun and rain, and rain and sun,
> Cherished men to wax again,
> Crawl, and in their manner die.
> On his people stood a frost.
> Like the charger cut in stone,
> Rearing stiff, the warrior host,
> Which had life from him alone,
> Craved the trumpet's eager note,
> As the bridled earth the Spring.
> Rusty was the trumpet's throat.

'Scorn of conquest' fills their chief. The great days have gone by—

> When they streaked the rivers red,
> When the saddle was the bed.
> Attila, my Attila!

He turns to thoughts of love, and 'the damsel Ildico' is his chosen bride. Her dumb horror of him is hinted; while, his 'chosen warriors, keen and hard,' for their part dislike his strange effeminacy and clamour to be led to fresh conquests. So the ill-omened marriage feast proceeds, somewhere in the northern wilds beyond Danube. Images taken from the giant river in its various moods constantly recur as a refrain giving the

motif of the poem,—the huge, wild, primitive forces, of nature and of man. Throughout the feast the bride neither speaks nor smiles. At last Attila rises to go forth to the bridal chamber, when

> One, with winecups overstrung,
> Cried him farewell in Rome's tongue.

Thereat he turns as in a daze, and utters the word 'Rome.' At once the drunken barbarians rise and shout to him to lead them against the capital of civilisation.

> Rome! the word was: and like meat
> Flung to dogs the word was torn.
> Soon Rome's magic priests shall bleat
> Round their magic Pope forlorn!
> Loud they swore the king had sworn
> Vengeance on the Roman cheat.[1]

But he passes out silent, between their furious ranks.

> Make the bed for Attila.

Next day he is found dead. The Huns do not know whether or not to think that he died by

---

[1] This, and still more the preceding verse (xvi.), would be more clearly understood if there was an historical note explaining that Attila had advanced on Rome a few months before his 'nuptials,' and been turned back by 'the pressing eloquence of (Pope) Leo, his majestic aspect, and sacerdotal robes,' and, as legend narrates, by 'the apparition of the two apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul.'—Gibbon, chap. xxxv.

Ildico's hand.[1] The last pages of the poem describe, with forcibly imaginative realism, the madness of the nation in arms swarming out as the news spreads through the camp, and the fierce scene as the chiefs burst into the bridal chamber, now the chamber of death. The army of foolish giants breaks up in bewilderment, wrath, and mutual suspicion. Here is the last verse of all :—

Kingless was the army left :
Of its head the race bereft.
Every fury of the pit
Tortured and dismembered it.
Lo, upon a silent hour,
When the pitch of frost subsides,
Danube with a shout of power
Loosens his imprisoned tides :
Wide around the frighted plains
Shake to hear his riven chains,
Dreadfuller than heaven in wrath,
As he makes himself a path :
High leap the ice-cracks, towering pile
Floes to bergs, and giant peers
Wrestle on a drifted isle ;
Island on ice-island rears ;
Dissolution battles fast :
Big the senseless Titans loom,
Through a mist of common doom
Striving which shall die the last :
Till a gentle-breathing morn
Frees the stream from bank to bank.
So the Empire built of scorn
Agonized, dissolved and sank.

[1] Probably his death was really due to the bursting of a blood-vessel. For the story in prose see Gibbon, chap. xxxv.

Of the Queen no more was told
Than of leaf on Danube rolled.
Make the bed for Attila!

'The Empire built of scorn' is a happy instance of the art by which he packs a complex idea into a single phrase. The whole moral of the poem is fitted into that one line. The Huns scorned the rest of mankind, so they perished. So must perish every power that is founded on disregard for others. And delicate is the art of the last allusion to poor little Ildico and her unrecorded fate among the titans in their last agony.

In ballads a specially high standard of lucidity is generally, and perhaps rightly, expected; and this requirement is scarcely met by *King Harald's Trance* and *Archduchess Anne*. But Mr. Meredith has written two very successful ballads, —*Fair Margaret's Bridal Eve*[1] and *The Young Princess*. The former is a ballad of the Rossetti type, of which it is a distinguished example, both for skilful management and variation of the refrain, and for vividness and beauty of phrase. But the aim and method of *The Young Princess* are more peculiarly Mr. Meredith's own; there we catch hints

[1] This can at present only be found in the edition of 1862 and in the Limited Collected Edition (vol. iii. of Poems).

of a mystic beauty, which, elusive as it is, seems the very essence of romance. He calls it, 'A Ballad of the Old Laws of Love,' as administered among the sentimental chivalry of Provence, those memorable civilisers, who in the heart of the dark ages invented romance, and first played the fantastic tune to which the heart of the Western world has beaten ever since.

> When the South sang like a nightingale
> Across the flowering night,
> And lord and dame held gentle sport,
> There came a young princess to Court,
> A frost of beauty white.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Like the banner of war she led them on,

and soon there were duels fought because of her. Still she feels love for none of them, though she is of gentle spirit. At last Sir Dusiote arranges a sham duel below her window at midnight. Roused

> by the crackle of steel
> Within the garden bounds,

she comes out to find him lying in the arms of a priest, on the bloody sward,—mortally wounded in defending her honour, as he says. On a wave of pity and gratitude she plights her troth to the trickster, thinking him about to die. He is borne off. Not daring to face her by daylight, he leaves the Court. But after a year he returns, to find her

sought in marriage by a foreign king. Thereupon he publicly claims her as his bride. She justly answers that it was a dying man to whom she gave herself: as her bridegroom, he is dead:—

> If a ghost should come a ghost will go:
> No more the lady said,
> Save that ever when he in wrath began
> To swear by the faith of a living man,
> She answered him, You are dead.

The last scene is midnight in the garden. Lord Dusiote has gone in to seek and claim his lady. His squire waits under the orange boughs for his return. The expectancy of the supreme moment is drawn out and exalted by verses that give all the fresh luxuriance of the southern night, charmed to passionate meaning by the nightingale in full song:—

> The soft night-wind went laden to death
> With smell of the orange in flower;
> The light leaves prattled to neighbour ears;
> The bird of the passion sang over his tears;
> The night named hour by hour.
>
> Sang loud, sang low the rapturous bird
> Till the yellow hour was nigh,
> Behind the folds of a darker cloud:
> He chuckled, he sobbed, alow, aloud;
> The voice between earth and sky.

To such a scene comes out at last the terrible procession of the slayers and the slain:—

All cloaked and masked, with naked blades,
That flashed of a judgement done,
The lords of the Court, from the palace-door,
Came issuing silently, bearers four,
And flat on their shoulders one.

It is thus that the other lords have fulfilled the lady's word.

'Flat on their shoulders one' is a memorable instance of Mr. Meredith's foreshortening method. The unessential has been most emphatically banished from the line, and yet it leaves nothing more to be asked or explained. Like the blow of the Matador, it makes an end.

Very different from this dream of a half imaginary age, is the ever-living, universal reality of *A Ballad of Past Meridian*.[1] One of the functions of the poet is to give utterance to his personal grief and joy, in such a manner that we can each of us find in his words the noblest utterance of our own most intimate thought, and feel that

A soul had passed and said our best.[2]

The poet is to be like the *Lark Ascending*—

The voice of one for millions,

---

[1] 'Meridian' means middle life, the 'mezzo del cammin di nostra vita.'

[2] *Reading of Life*, p. 58: *The Night Walk.*

singing his own joy, or grief, yet

free
Of taint of personality.

It is here that Byron fails; here that Teufelsdröckh (though not the later Carlyle) succeeds. And it is in its fulfilment of these conditions that the *Ballad of Past Meridian* has power. It is not the 'dragon of self,' but the universal man uttering the individual thought common to us all:—

Last night returning from my twilight walk
I met the grey mist Death, whose eyeless brow
Was bent on me, and from his hand of chalk
He reached me flowers as from a withered bough:
O Death, what bitter nosegays givest thou!

Death said, I gather, and pursued his way.
Another stood by me, a shape in stone,
Sword-hacked and iron-stained, with breasts of clay,
And metal veins that sometimes fiery shone:
O Life, how naked and how hard when known!

Life said, As thou hast carved me, such am I.
Then memory, like the nightjar on the pine,
And sightless hope, a woodlark in night sky,
Joined notes of Death and Life till night's decline:
Of Death, of Life, those inwound notes are mine.

So too in the following poem (of the species which we may call the 'dwarf lyric') Mr. Meredith gives an essentially personal feeling of sympathetic community with inanimate nature. It is known, at moments of rare insight, to all who feel deeply, but

it can be communicated from man to man only in such delicately inspired verse as this :—

They have no song, the sedges dry,
And still they sing.
It is within my breast they sing,
As I pass by.
Within my breast they touch a string,
They wake a sigh.
There is but sound of sedges dry ;
In me they sing.[1]

Apart from *Modern Love*, Mr. Meredith has written many sonnets, with the orthodox numbers of lines. In his hands the sonnet is the vessel always of original thought and pithy expression, and very often of the noblest beauty. Sometimes the eccentricity and carelessness of his powerful utterance seem uncongenial to the traditions of the sonnet ; but often those traditions inspire him with the sense of order and of finished art, and force him to employ the weapons of construction and elucidation which it is his grave fault so often to leave in rust. In the following sonnet, the first four lines illustrate the unfitness, the last ten the

[1] *A Reading of Life* (1901), p. 63 : *Song in the Songless.* For other 'dwarf lyrics' see *Poems*, i. 69-72 : *Love is Winged*, *Ask is Love Divine*, *Joy is Fleet*, and *The Lesson of Grief* ; and *Poems*, ii. 133 : *Mother to Babe.* He is a master of this diminutive verse.

fitness, of the sonnet form to his genius. The title is *A Later Alexandrian*; the subject, one would guess, is a certain poet who lived considerably after the era of the Ptolemies:—

> An inspiration caught from dubious hues
> Filled him, and mystic wrynesses he chased;
> For they lead farther than the single-faced,
> Wave subtler promise when desire pursues.
> The moon of cloud discoloured was his Muse,
> His pipe the reed of the old moaning waste.
> Love was to him with anguish fast enlaced,
> And Beauty where she walked blood-shot the dews.
> Men railed at such a singer; women thrilled
> Responsively: he sang not Nature's own
> Divinest, but his lyric had a tone,
> As 'twere a forest-echo of her voice:
> What barrenly they yearn for seemed distilled
> From what they dread, who do through tears rejoice.

Since the greater number of Mr. Meredith's sonnets illustrate his philosophy and ethics, or his practical wisdom in the affairs of men or of nations, I shall have occasion to quote from them later in the book. Here, therefore, I will only cite one more, called *Lucifer in Starlight*, specially commending it to those who have been taught to think of Mr. Meredith as an anarchist, or at least an eccentric, either in literature or in thought:—

> On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose.
> Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend
> Above the rolling ball in cloud part screened,
> Where sinners hugged their spectre of repose.

Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.
And now upon his western wing he leaned,
Now his huge bulk o'er Afric's sands careened,
Now the black planet shadowed Arctic snows.
Soaring through wider zones that pricked his scars
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,
He reached a middle height, and at the stars,
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank.
Around the ancient track marched rank on rank,
The army of unalterable law.

CHAPTER II

THE SINGER OF STRANGE SONGS

MR. MEREDITH, both in verse and prose, is the poet of common sense, the inspired prophet of sanity. He holds the middle path, observing of mankind that—

> here they are wild waves
> And there as marsh descried.[1]

The great poets whose lives and writings best illustrate the diversity of human nature and throw lustre on the most opposite forms of its exaggeration and shortcoming, easily compel his admiration for their genius: but his own temperament is not exactly that of Shelley or of Mr. Swinburne on the one hand, or of Wordsworth and Tennyson on the other. Though he is constantly urged, and often overdriven by a sleepless imagination and an intellect the most vigilant that ever kept watch against dulness, his thought-wanderings circle round a central point of vision. Though he is

[1] *Men and Man.*

famous for grotesques such as Harry Richmond's father, and is himself the patient father of the wild young heroes and heroines who are the life of his novels, though he argues as a part of his philosophy that youth had better be generous and impulsive even at the price of much folly rather than bloodless and wise over-soon,—yet the right end for a man in his eyes is to become like Vernon Whitford. That foil to the Egoist is not a mere negative: he is drawn as a type of positive virtue, as an incarnate attitude to life, and if he seems too inhuman and too abstract to be the bridegroom of Clara Middleton, it is, I think, because he was regarded by the author somewhat in the way here suggested. Vernon Whitford, or Redworth in *Diana*, represent an ethical ideal based on a particular philosophy of life. They offer a type imitable by all, for it will bear transplantation into any age, class, or country—though we can boast that our own England bred them. In order to rise to this ideal, character is required, but genius is not necessary. Vernon is the normal glorified; he is not a splendid freak of nature, not a traveller from Utopia. Indeed they say that it is but lately that he walked the earth with rapid strides, the bearer of a name now famous in the Alps and elsewhere; and most of us have been fortunate enough to know others not unlike Vernon or Redworth in the ground-plan of their characters.

This ideal could not, I think, have satisfied other and more typical poets—Shelley, Swinburne, or even Browning. It would have seemed to them tame. But in everything it is Mr. Meredith's special province to seek the golden mean—a very different thing from the leaden mean which passes on the world's counter, the favourite coin of those

who what they are would be.

The golden mean is to him a path of progress for the race, the step forward through the storm, 'the speeding of us, compact of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools, to the creation of certain nobler races, now very dimly imagined.'[1]

The gospel of sanity is always dull, except when it is preached by a man of brilliant imagination and subtle intellect, and such men are usually drawn towards other themes. Hence the rare value of Mr. Meredith's influence, which is doing much to form—opinion perhaps, certainly character. Yet so strange and playful are the unknown powers which mould genius, that this prophet of common sense has won himself a reputation with the distracted multitude as an eccentric author and a dealer in hard sayings. Even some who have

[1] *Diana*, chap. xxxvii.

read his works might declare, in his own language, that

> mystic wrynesses he chased,

and that

> What words he taught were nails to scratch the head.[1]

Charges of eccentricity, never applicable to his thought, of which the 'harmonies always are sane,' are sometimes too true of his style. The fault of obscurity, not absent from the novels, is conspicuous in some of the poems. No treatise on Mr. Meredith's poetry would be adequate if it neglected to analyse the complex nature and various causes of this obscurity, which is no more all of one kind than it is all of one degree of opaqueness.

But before entering upon any such investigation, it is necessary to protest against the idea that all Mr. Meredith's poetry is obscure. It would be easy to select from his works a body of poetry not open to this charge, as large in absolute bulk and as good in comparison to the rest of the author's verse, as those poems on which the reputations of Coleridge and Keats have actually been founded.

At the other end of the scale are poems too obscure to please any except disciples who hang on Mr. Meredith's heaviest word. The two *Odes* to the *Comic Spirit* and to *Youth in Memory*, are as

[1] *Reading of Life* (1901), p. 73: *Forest History.*

difficult as *Sordello*. The *Ode to the Comic Spirit*, of which, as of *Sordello*, the first line is humorously intelligible, would perhaps be of more value, if most of what it says in obscure diction were not already said with admirable clearness in the prose of his *Essay on Comedy*. So, too, *The Empty Purse*, a characteristic *Sermon to our Later Prodigal Son*, ought to have been in prose: its essential content is the stuff of which his novels are largely made up and whence they draw their peculiar value, but it has been marred in adaptation to a rude and halting verse medium. Two or three passages, however, can claim to be 'accepted of song' though the numbers be not Miltonic; as where, expounding his central doctrine of ethical practice, he says:—

> The young generation! ah, there is the child
> Of our souls down the Ages! to bleed for it, proof
> That souls we have.
> . . . . . .
> Thou under stress of the strife,
> Shalt hear for sustainment supreme,
> The cry of the conscience of Life:
> *Keep the young generations in hail,*
> *And bequeath them no tumbled house!*

And hence his song of Faith in the future—

> By my faith, there is feasting to come,
> Not the less, when our Earth we have seen
> Beneath and on surface, her deeds and designs:
> Who gives us the man-loving Nazarene,
> The martyrs, the poets, the corn and the vines.

> By my faith in the head, she has wonders in loom ;
> Revelations, delights. I can hear a faint crow
> Of the cock of fresh mornings, far, far, yet distinct ;
> As down the new shafting of mines,
> A cry of the metally gnome.

These ten lines have that haunting quality, which is as good a touchstone to distinguish poetry from prose, as any other arbitrary test that can be devised to gratify the inveterate love of mankind for definitions. Poetry is not, however, the name for other and longer passages from *The Empty Purse*.

But between the poems like *Love in the Valley* that are not seriously obscure, and those like *The Empty Purse*, which have forfeited most of their merit by obscurity or ruggedness, stands a great body of work where the dark and the lucid are mixed in various degrees. Here, for instance, is a passage from the *Night Walk*, typical of many others both in its faults and virtues. The subject is characteristic : two young Englishmen, seeking Vernon's cure for all human ills, have prolonged their walk after nightfall. It is a song of the glory of motion, as known in its highest form only to the good walker.[1] The play of the physical powers rouses the spiritual ; and the gallant dreams of

[1] For a prose version of this poem, see Leslie Stephen's article *In Praise of Walking* (*Monthly Review*, August 1901).

youth gleam in the head of either comrade, as the two stride along together, silent, or in fitful talk now about roadway objects, now about poets or heroes of old. Whoever has not forgotten his own youth, the time when the friendships of life are formed, when we are conscious of powers within not yet measured, and a world of wonder all around inviting us to the feast and to the deed—such a one will sympathetically feel the truth and beauty of this poem :—

A pride of legs in motion kept
Our spirits to their task meanwhile,
And what was deepest dreaming slept :
The posts that named the swallowed mile ;
Beside the straight canal the hut
Abandoned ; near the river's source
Its infant chirp ; the shortest cut ;
The roadway missed ; were our discourse ;
At times dear poets, whom some view
Transcendent or subdued evoked
To speak the memorable, the true,
The luminous as a moon uncloaked ;
For proof that there, among earth's dumb,
A soul had passed and said our best.
Or it might be we chimed on some
Historic favourite's astral crest,
With part to reverence in its gleam,
And part to rivalry the shout :
So royal, unuttered, is youth's dream
Of power within to strike without.
But most the silences were sweet,
Like mothers' breasts, to bid it feel
It lived in such divine conceit
As envies aught we stamp for real.

To either then an untold tale
Was Life, and author, hero, we.
The chapters holding peaks to scale,
Or depths to fathom, made our glee;
For we were armed of inner fires,
Unbled in us the ripe desires;
And passion rolled a quiet sea,
Whereon was Love the phantom sail.[1]

This passage might at first sight frighten one unaccustomed to Mr. Meredith's phraseology and line of thought. Yet I do not think there is ultimately cause for complaint against the obscurity of anything except the lines which I have put in italics. They are a blot, of the kind to which we must accustom ourselves in reading this poet. Words like these, which give us pause before we can grasp their sense, stand very ill after a couplet of such masterful and compact simplicity as,

So royal, unuttered, is youth's dream
Of power within to strike without,

and after the memorable line,

But most the silences were sweet,

and come very strangely before the clear ringing pæan on the state of youth, with which the poem closes; they ought not to be within fifty lines of a phrase like—

And passion rolled a quiet sea,
Whereon was Love the phantom sail—

[1] *A Reading of Life* (1901), pp. 57-59: *The Night Walk.*

which is a triumph of inspiration and of art such as only a great master can occasionally produce. We must wonder regretfully at the indifference of the poet who could leave any part of his thought to stand between such noble supporters in so unpleasing a dress.[1]

It would not be hard to quote many another fine passage more or less injured by the presence of some too difficult couplet. The following little poem, *Wind on the Lyre*, would be a gem of art if it were not for the two lines which I have printed in italics :—

> That was the chirp of Ariel
> You heard, as overhead it flew,
> *The farther going more to dwell,*
> *And wing our green to wed our blue;*
> But whether note of joy or knell,
> Not his own Father-singer knew;
> Nor yet can any mortal tell,
> Save only how it shivers through
> The breast of us a sounded shell,
> The blood of us a lighted dew.[2]

The 'chirp of Ariel' overhead is the fugitive breath of poetry, that once and again in the life of each man thrills him with a mysterious, momentary

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[1] The meaning of the three difficult lines is, I suppose, that the moments of silence were like mothers' breasts, a soft refuge and nursery to it (youth's dream), making it feel a state of divine conceit (imagination), such as reality must be envious of.

[2] *Wind on the Lyre.*

uplifting, a strange waft of intensest feeling, seemingly from unknown worlds. It is the heart of poetry. But is that most akin to joy or to sorrow? Ariel's 'Father-singer,' Shakespeare, whom some proclaim optimist and others pessimist, knew not whether he was uttering 'note of joy or knell.' But we feel the thrill, none the less for not knowing whence it comes. Such clearly is the main idea of the little piece, and but for the third and fourth lines, I do not see that the idea could be put with any poetic force in language more obvious than that used by Mr. Meredith. For the idea itself belongs to that mysterious and formless part of mental experience which it is the proper task of the poet in this workaday world to set before us in all its natural mystery, lest we should all of us become statisticians or dogmatists.

As to the two lines which I have marked out, each of them adds a separate idea to the main one of the poem (and indeed most of Mr. Meredith's obscure passages have become so through too great condensation).

> The farther going more to dwell,

means that the farther back in time these experiences recede, the more they dwell in our hearts by memory;

> And wing our green to wed our blue,

means that such memories give wings to the

earthly part of us to rise and wed the heavenly. The marriage of Heaven and Earth is a favourite metaphor of Mr. Meredith's. The 'green' earth stands with him for spirit and matter combined; the 'blue' heaven for pure spiritual—the unknown God, who is only to be approached through earthly means. But I do not think that any explanation can altogether redeem these two lines, from a literary point of view.

In attempting to analyse the causes and nature of the obscurity charged against much of Mr. Meredith's work, I shall for the sake of clearness divide my remarks under two heads: treating first of the difficulties arising out of his literary methods, and afterwards of those which are due to the subject-matter of his poems. There is most complaint to be made against the former class, but even there the faults of his style are the inverse of its peculiar merits, and are in some degree and in some cases the necessary price paid for achievement.

The most obvious cause of obscurity in his style lies in certain tricks of omission, which, when they do not violate grammar, at least confuse the construction and delay the appearance of the meaning. When once the reader is warned of these customs it is easy to be on the watch for them, and much of the difficulty disappears. But

even to the most practised ear they give a sense, if no longer of obscurity, still of ruggedness, which is often not agreeable to the genius of poetry. There is too plentiful a lack of 'a,' 'the,' 'and,' 'who,' which,' and 'if.' The relative pronoun is sometimes put on the retired list when there is dire need of him, as, for instance, where the poet, speaking of Fortune, says :—

> Nathless she strikes at random, can be fell
> With other than those votaries she deals
> The black or brilliant from her thunder-rift.[1]

To omit the words 'to whom' after 'votaries' is confusing.

The ordinary conditional clause is perhaps too often displaced in favour of an elliptic form ; no doubt it is legitimate, in the well-known opening stanza of the *Woods of Westermain*, to say—

> Foot at peace with mouse and worm,
> Fair you fare,
> Only at a dread of dark
> Quaver, and they quit their form :

meaning, 'if you foot . . . you fare fairly,' and 'if you quaver . . . they quit their form' ; but on some other occasions this construction helps to complicate still further a skein already tangled enough.

Among his favourite customs we may note the

[1] Sonnet, *My Theme.*

use of the adjective as a substantive, as in the following couplet, where, speaking of the dome of the starlit heavens, and the hungry fear which sometimes strikes for a moment into the heart of the solitary gazer at all its material vastness, he says—

> Fronting *yon shoreless*, sown with fiery sails,
> It is *our ravenous* that quails.[1]

Then, by way of compensation, substantives are sometimes used for adjectives: as when the urchins clamouring at the door on Mayday are sent off with pennies,

> In a buzz of young *company* glee.[2]

Some of Mr. Meredith's peculiar phrases are the special language of his philosophy. Thus we have already noted the use of 'green' and 'blue' for Earth and Heaven in their metaphorical sense. And whenever the reader has momentarily lost sight of the context, and finds the pronouns 'she' and 'her' occupying much of the page, the odds are that 'our Mother Earth' has become the theme of the argument.

But a more important cause of obscurity and

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[1] *Meditation under Stars.* Compare Shakespeare's—'The dark *backward* and abysm of Time' (*Tempest*, I. ii.).

[2] *A Faith on Trial.*

ruggedness than a few special phrases, constructions, and tricks of omission, is Mr. Meredith's whole literary method, of which such mannerisms are merely a cognate part. I have already discussed that method in the previous chapter. His two worst faults, the two chief causes of his obscurity, are the inverse of two of the most peculiar merits of his style. I mean, first, that the occasional confusion of his imagery and mixture of his metaphors are the outcome of the very wealth of imagination which crowns him poet; and secondly, that his art of compression and his omission of the unessential, which when they succeed bring us passages of a force rare in literature, too often leave the construction and the sense not sufficiently elaborated. I will illustrate his usage, first as to confused wealth of imagery, and then as to the omission of necessary links of thought.

Metaphor is both his strength and his undoing. The readiness of his fancy always supplies the physical parallel for the psychological situation; and he can never describe one scene but it will remind him of some other. His ordinary paraphrases, his common nouns and verbs and sentences are more suggestive, if less perfect, than those of other writers. Every phrase counts. When he means 'she did not blush,' he says—

Not a sign of the torch in the blood.[1]

When, in a philosophic poem, he has occasion to describe the life of idleness, he puts it at once into the pictorial form of lying in a hammock, and so says—

In some bower of ease
Slothful to swing, contending with the flies.[2]

Often, too, his more elaborate and protracted metaphors succeed to perfection. But sometimes they are mixed, because, before the reader has finished with the first, the poet's mind has rushed on to a new image, and the result is a sort of composite photograph, the imposition of one picture on another. His pen has too little control over the pace at which his brain works.

Mr. Meredith's metaphors, even when they are not mixed, are seldom meant to be pressed far. He brings in a metaphor to render the main idea, situation or picture more vivid, by recalling something spiritually analogous to its essence. But he does not desire that the two images should be dovetailed into each other so as to tally at more points than one. When Shakespeare's laugh is said to be 'broad as ten thousand beeves at pasture!'[3] we need not suppose that there is other

[1] *Day of the Daughter of Hades.*
[2] Sonnet, *The Discipline of Wisdom.*
[3] *Spirit of Shakespeare.*

resemblance than in the general spirit of spacious, catholic happiness; but in that sense the comparison is not only daring and original but very much to the point. So, too, in his poem that tells of *The Hueless Love*,[1] as he calls the Platonic affection of a man and woman divided by marriage, the man dies, and 'their first touch of lips' is 'as he lay cold.' When she thus kissed him, the poet says, it was as

> When sister snowflake sister snowdrop kissed,
> And one passed out, and one the bell-head hung.

The spirit of the scene, in its atmosphere of chastity and of death, is like that of the snowflake sliding off the snowdrop. But the man is not the flower and the woman the flake, nor is the man the flake and the woman the flower. 'Mrs. Mountstuart detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected.'[2]

But often the difficulties arising in his use of imagery are due to the other chief fault of his style, his abuse of the method of compression, when he cuts out necessary links of language. Thus the noun connected with the theme of the poem is sometimes used to govern the verb in the allegory which illustrates it: the image and the thing

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[1] *A Reading of Life* (1901), pp. 60-62.

[2] *Egoist*, chap. v.

which it reflects are rolled into one sentence. As, for example—

> That little twist of brain would ring a chime.[1]

But if he had not sometimes ventured and fallen on these paths perilous, perhaps he would never have dared the splendid audacity of—

> Shudder all the haunted roods,
> All the eyeballs under hoods
> Shroud you in their glare.[2]

And if he has to describe Napoleon's veterans going down into the tumult and smoky darkness of the battle, in order to make the idea of the scene strike on eye and ear all in one moment, he will not hesitate to say that they

> bore
> His eagles through the *tawny roar*.[3]

Often he is not careful enough to leave traces of the process of thought by which he has arrived at some phrase or figure. His words are not a regular progression, but the landing stages to a series of leaps. Here, for instance, is another quotation, again taken from the *Woods of Westermain*:—

> On the throne Success usurps,
> You shall seat the joy you feel
> Where a race of water chirps,
> Twisting hues of flourished steel.

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[1] *The Spirit of Shakespeare* (continued).
[2] *The Woods of Westermain.*
[3] *Odes on French History*, p. 41 : *Napoléon.*

He has packed into these four short lines an elaborate ethical precept, the description of a noisy brook and a metaphor to illustrate its appearance to the eye.[1] This compactness of phrase accounts for the impression which the lines make upon the memory, but it certainly also accounts for the difficulty that is found in understanding their drift.

On the same page of the *Woods of Westermain* occurs another passage, equally illustrative at once of the difficulty and success of his method of speech when he is in his most eccentric vein. He is saying that in the passionless and brainless eyes of grazing oxen, you can read the characteristic of those primitive forms of life out of which we have been evolved :—

> where old-eyed oxen chew
> Speculation with the cud,
> Read their pool of vision through,
> Back to hours when mind was mud.

The sight of those stupid eyes carries him back in feeling to the 'timeless' æons of 'untwining' evolution, when nature was but half awake, when

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[1] The meaning is that the throne of a life well realised, which is falsely claimed by the votaries of worldly success, really belongs to those who feel joy in the heart of nature : to listen to the chirp of a brooklet and to see it twist its blue and silver flashes of hurrying water, like flourished steel, is to have more joy than worldly success can bring.

the earth lifted naked, slippery rocks out of the water, when heaven would have seemed but a space through which lumpish masses flew :—

> Nigh the knot, which did untwine
> Timelessly to drowsy suns ;
> Seeing Earth a slimy spine,
> Heaven a space for winging tons.

The stunning brevity of these lines, the heavy call which they make on our powers of understanding and sympathy to interpret them, are defensible only on the ground that they have a picturesque effectiveness that captures the imagination and holds the memory.

I will now pass on from Mr. Meredith's literary style to his subject-matter. That it is less important than the style as a cause of obscurity is proved by the fact that some Ballads, such as *King Harald's Trance* and the *Archduchess Anne*, though they confine themselves to narrative, are more difficult than some of his most philosophical poems. Yet in a large proportion of his verse, the comprehension of the full meaning is assisted by familiarity with his philosophy and view of life.

On those questions I shall speak more fully in the next chapter. Here I will only call attention to the subject-matter of one of his greatest poems, the *Hymn to Colour*. Its main ideas, though fully in

accord with those which inspire his other writings, are on a somewhat different plane of thought and feeling. As the diction is neither rugged nor careless, it must be something other than the style which prevents us from classing the *Hymn to Colour* among his simpler pieces. Certainly the exact meaning is not easy to define, though the general impression is soon conveyed to readers with a real poetical instinct. Like a bottomless ocean, it has depths for us to fathom—depths where not the poet himself pretends quite to touch ground. The thought is so intimate, so subtle, so spiritual, that it could not be expressed more exactly. It would 'break through language and escape,' if the author might use no words but those which a schoolboy could understand. Yet this is the class of ideas for which the call has now come, if further spiritual progress is to be made. The army of human thought is advancing in two bands: one marches along the high road under the bright hard light of science; but the other is straggling into the dimmer shades of intricate psychology, into 'haunted roods,' the birthplace of new aspirations, prophecies, and religions, which can find no expression in dogmatic statement, but only in the inspired language of beauty, suggesting the undefined, and making the unseen felt. Mr. Meredith has long been a leader in this direction. He seems (if we may apply to him one of his own phrases)—

To breathe around the secret things,
Which have no word, and yet are known.

We may say of some of his poetry,

we gained enough
By this to feel it honest fare;
Impalpable, not barren, stuff.[1]

What exactly does the *Hymn to Colour* mean? It is not easy to write down the answer, because to pour it into more exact words would be to spill its essence. But let us ask by way of reply: What exactly do the universe and the life of man mean? Perhaps that knowledge cannot be put into exact words. Perhaps it is too sacred for exact words to signify it. If, then, the dogmatic answer to the Sphinx has nowadays for very shame to be silent, must therefore all voice of faith, hope, reverence, and love, fall silent also? And if not, it is in some such language as the *Hymn to Colour* that

voice of ours can say
Our inmost in the sweetest way.[2]

Nevertheless, I will quote some verses, and add a few explanatory comments.

If there is one phenomenon of nature which has more charm and more significance than another for Mr. Meredith, it is dawn. Often in Tyrol he must have watched the

[1] *Reading of Life* (1901), p. 57: *The Night Walk.*
[2] *The Lark Ascending.*

heights where morning wakes
With one cheek over snow ;—
And iron-walled lakes
Where sits the white moon low ;[1]

and often in England have waited early to mark the

bloom of dawn, breathed up from the gold sheaf
Held springing beneath Orient !

And this is the subject of the *Hymn to Colour*: it tells first of the grey twilight, and then of the miracle that clothes the air, for a few flying moments, with the many-coloured garments of dawn. But a dualism runs through the thought of the whole poem. Light, Darkness, and Colour answer respectively to Life, Death, and Love. Colour is to Light and Darkness, as Love is to Life and Death. In the first verse, the poet, walking between Death and Life, is met by Love, in the pale 'land of dawn' between night and day, at the moment when the 'transforming sky' is about to be flushed with colour :—

I

With Life and Death I walked when Love appeared,
And made them on each side a shadow seem.
Through wooded vales the land of dawn we neared,
Where down smooth rapids whirls the helmless dream
To fall on daylight ; and night puts away
Her darker veil for grey.

[1] Edition 1862, p. 116 : *The Patriot Engineer*.

II

In that grey veil green grassblades brushed we by ;
We came where woods breathed sharp, and overhead
Rocks raised clear horns on a transforming sky :
Around, save for those shapes, with him who led
And linked them, desert varied by no sign
Of other life than mine.

Then, as the morning star wanes in the growing light, Life and Death fade from the poet's side, and Love is left as his sole companion :—

III

By this the dark-winged planet, raying wide,
From the mild pearl-glow to the rose upborne,
Drew in his fires, less faint than far descried,
Pure-fronted on a stronger wave of morn :
And those two shapes the splendour interweaved,
Hung web-like, sank and heaved.

Then, as dawn is about to break, Love speaks to him :—

IV

Love took my hand when hidden stood the sun
To fling his robe on shoulder-heights of snow.
Then said : there lie they, Life and Death in one.
Whichever is, the other is : but know,
It is thy craving self that thou dost see,
Not in them seeing me.[1]

Then dawn rises, and Colour makes the dull sky

[1] That is : Life and Death are mutually complementary and parts of the same system ; but it is only your own hungry selfishness that you see, if you do not, in viewing Life and Death, see Love.

splendid. Colour, as we have said, answers allegorically to Love, or rather to that passionate poetical realisation of the spiritual value of earthly things of which Love is the greatest exemplar. Without this sense of colour, the soul is widowed. But wedded to Colour as her bridegroom, she has strength and faith.

VI

Look now where Colour, the soul's bridegroom, makes
The house of heaven splendid for the bride.

. . . . . .

VII

He gives her homeliness in desert air,
And sovereignty in spaciousness ; he leads
Through widening chambers of surprise to where
Throbs rapture near an end that aye recedes,
Because his touch is infinite and lends
A yonder to all ends.

. . . . . .

never soul embraced
Of him can harbour unfaith ; soul of him
Possessed walks never dim.

The colours of dawn fade too soon, but they live in 'rosy memories.' So when the precious moment is passed, Love sings this hymn of thanksgiving and recollection addressed to Colour, as to a god :—

IX

Love eyed his rosy memories : he sang ;
O bloom of dawn, breathed up from the gold sheaf
Held springing beneath Orient ! that dost hang

The space of dewdrops running over leaf;
Thy fleetingness is bigger in the ghost
Than Time with all his host!

X

Of thee to say behold, has said adieu:
But love remembers how the sky was green,
And how the grasses glimmered lightest blue;
How saint-like grey took fervour: how the screen
Of cloud grew violet; how thy moment came
Between a blush and flame.

XII

They do not look through love to look on thee,
Grave heavenliness! nor know they joy of sight,
Who deem the wave of rapt desire must be
Its wrecking and last issue of delight.
Dead seasons quicken in one petal-spot
Of colour unforgot.

XIII

This way have men come out of brutishness
To spell the letters of the sky and read
A reflex upon earth else meaningless.
With thee, O fount of the Untimed! to lead;
Drink they of thee, thee eyeing, they unaged
Shall on through brave wars waged.

XIV

More gardens will they win than any lost;
The vile plucked out of them, the unlovely slain.
Not forfeiting the beast with which they are crossed,
To stature of the Gods will they attain.
They shall uplift their Earth to meet her Lord,
Themselves the attuning chord!

So ends Love's song. And when Life and Death return, the poet views them with far other eyes:—

XV

The song had ceased ; my vision with the song.
Then of those Shadows, which one made descent
Beside me I knew not : but Life ere long
Came on me in the public ways and bent
Eyes deeper than of old : Death met I too,
And saw the dawn glow through.

Such is the *Hymn to Colour*. I have quoted enough to enable the reader to judge for himself of its poetical value. If it is more obscure than we could wish the highest poetry to be, that is due to the subject matter, and is, as I have argued, not only excusable but necessary. Except in one or two places there is little ruggedness of phrase. In these respects it stands rather by itself among the more philosophic poems. *Seed-Time* displays exactly opposite qualities. In *Seed-Time* the metre has not the charm and beauty of the majestic and meditative *Hymn to Colour*, or of the impetuous and choric *Love in the Valley*. Yet no poem has more originality of phrase, more convincing description of nature, more weight of ethical meaning. If *Seed-Time* is not poetry, at any rate it is literature. The opening stanzas impress on all our five senses the chill of the wet misty autumn, when earth and sky seem wrapped in decay, 'soaked in the ditch's dyes.'

Now seems none but the spider lord ;

. . . . . .

All is adroop on the down and the weald.

. . . . . .

Mists more lone for the sheep-bell enwrap
Nights that tardily let slip a morn
Paler than moons, and on noontide's lap
Flame dies cold, like the rose late born.
Rose born late, born withered in bud!—
I, even I, for a zenith of sun
Cry, to fulfil me, nourish my blood:
O for a day of the long light, one!

None but those who have health of body and brain can endure long weeks of this weather without depression. But the true reading of such a season is not hidden from a poet who is ever on the watch for more than the sensual, more than the æsthetic aspects of a scene. To him Autumn and Winter are *Seed-Time.*

Master the blood, nor read by chills,
Earth admonishes: Hast thou ploughed,
Sown, reaped, harvested grain for the mills,
Thou hast the light over shadow of cloud.

. . . . . .

Verily now is our season of seed,
Now in our Autumn; and Earth discerns
Them that have served her in them that can read,
Glassing, where under the surface she burns,
Quick at her wheel, while the fuel, decay,
Brightens the fire of renewal: and we?
Death is the word of a bovine day,
Know you the breast of the springing To-be.

To this reading of Autumn we can compare the lines in the great *Ode* :—

Behold, in yon stripped Autumn, shivering, gray,
Earth knows no desolation,
She smells regeneration
In the moist breath of decay.

. . . .

She knows no loss :
She feels but her need,
Who the winged seed
With the leaf doth toss.[1]

Midway between the *Hymn to Colour*, a triumph of poetical art, and *Seed-Time*, where no lyrical effect (in the ordinary sense of the word) is even aimed at, stands such a poem as *Phoebus with Admetus*. In it there is civil war between the lyrical aspirations of the piece on the one hand, and its occasional uncouthness of phrase and audacity of metaphor on the other. It has a lilt which at times reminds us of *Love in the Valley*. Here, for instance, is the verse in which the water of the brook welcomes the advent of the Sun-god as day-labourer on Admetus' farm :—

Water, first of singers, o'er rocky mount and mead,
First of earthly singers, the sun-loved rill,
Sang of him, and flooded the ripples on the reed,
Seeking whom to waken and what ear fill.
Water, sweetest soother to kiss a wound and cool,
Sweetest and divinest, the sky-born brook,
Chuckled, with a whimper, and made a mirror-pool
Round the guest we welcomed, the strange hand shook.

[1] *Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn*, see p. 231, below.

God ! of whom music
And song and blood are pure,
The day is never darkened
That had thee here obscure.

Or consider the last verse, in which the shepherds who had been the god's workmates, call on animate and inanimate nature, the beasts on the farm, the branches that 'build the shade-roof,' and the water pouring over the rock, to remember who had been their fellow :—

You with shelly horns, rams ! and, promontory goats,
You whose browsing beards dip in coldest dew !
Bulls, that walk the pastures in kingly-flashing coats !
Laurel, ivy, vine, wreathed for feasts not few !
You that build the shade-roof, and you that court the rays,
You that leap besprinkling the rock stream-rent :
He has been our fellow, the morning of our days ;
Us he chose for housemates, and this way went.
God ! of whom music
And song and blood are pure,
The day is never darkened
That had thee here obscure.

When a poem contains two such verses as these, it seems a pity that some sacrifice was not made to bring all of it up to the same level of limpid and lyrical perfection. There is, indeed, much beauty in the other verses ; they describe the life on the farm, its prosperity and its joys while the god lived among men, all the arts he taught them, stirring

Contention to give delight and be
Excellent in things aimed to make life kind ;

the tales he told

> of giants at war with Gods above :
> Rocks were they to look on, and earth climbed air !
> Tales of search for simples, and those who sought of love
> Ease because the creature was all too fair.

The happy scene at the end of the vintage, when the men sealed the plump wineskins, and

> Maidens clung in circle, on little fists their chins ;
> Gentle beasties through pushed a cold long nose,

gives us the cattle in the farmyard very memorably. On the other hand,

> Safe the tender lambs tugged the teats, and winter sped
> Whirled before the crocus, the year's new gold.
> Hung the hooky beak up aloft the arrowhead
> Reddened through his feathers for our dear fold,

though it contains one fine line, supplies but a cumbersome method of saying in the last two lines that the birds of prey were shot, to protect the lambs. Nor is it easy to digest the 'pomegranates' in the seventh verse. These, and some harsh constructions, as in the first verse, mar the lyrical perfection of this poem ; but even as it stands, it belongs to that rare order of beauty which familiarity only makes more beautiful.

I have now done my best to analyse and to illustrate the very various causes of obscurity and

ruggedness in Mr. Meredith's poems. My principal contentions have been—that these faults are mostly due to the style, but occasionally to the subject-matter. That where they are due to the subject-matter, they are often an unavoidable condition of progress in poetic thought and feeling. That where they are due to style, they sometimes arise from a serious overrating by the poet of the average swiftness of comprehension (due, perhaps, in part to want of public attention and appreciative criticism during the years when his style was being formed). But that sometimes and to some degree these faults are the necessary price paid for those literary merits which distinguish his work.

But whatever be the causes and nature of his obscurity and ruggedness, every one who has so much as looked into Mr. Meredith's poetry knows that there are immense varieties in degree of lucidity, not only between poem and poem, but between neighbouring passages in those poems which are counted as obscure: and every one whose courage has not failed him at the first onset, knows how quickly custom brings skill at interpretation, and what rich reward there is for persistence. The appetite for Mr. Meredith's poetry grows by what it feeds on. At the first reading of a poem some lines, probably, will capture the imagination; the rest, perhaps, will seem in-

ferior or obscure. A second reading extends the range. A third may render us greedy of the whole poem. Not to be fully comprehended and wholly appreciated at first sight is a fault; but it is a fault generally found in the noblest men and the highest things. This sentiment is indeed a commonplace; but it is worth repeating, for in practice it is treated as a paradox.

In Mr. Meredith's narrative poems, obscurity sometimes arises from his habit of telling a story in an allusive style, implying that the incidents which he celebrates are familiar to every one. But in fact most of them are not at all widely known, so that a short note, telling the story, or at least describing the opening situation, would often be useful. The tale of Queen Theodolind's crown, to which such an explanatory note is appended at the end of Volume II. of the Collected Poems, is by no means more abstruse than that of his other mediæval ballads. And many readers nowadays are ignorant of the world of Greek mythology of which Mr. Meredith has a scholar's knowledge and a poet's love.[1] Born and bred in the England

[1] Those who keep watch for new experiments in translating Homer will do well to examine Mr. Meredith's fragments at the end of *A Reading of Life* (1901). They have much of the spirit of the original. The poetical atmosphere of his ballad of

of the mid-nineteenth century, he wrote (in vain, it is true) for a reading public which was then confined to an upper class educated in the details of classical lore. To-day education has spread downwards, so that his readers are drawn by a process of natural selection from persons of all classes: I have been taken to task by a working man for saying that his poem on Napoleon was obscure. Neither is upper class education so thoroughly classical as of old. There are now many highly educated men, and very many highly educated women (a consideration which must appeal to Mr. Meredith), who are liable to be puzzled, for instance, by the mythology of the *Day of the Daughter of Hades*. Since Persephone, Demeter and Pluto are never once mentioned by name, although they are important actors in the scene, it

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Phaëthon is somewhat similar in its blending of rude primæval vigour with beauty of imagination.

To the bolt he launched, 'Strike dead, thou,' uttered Zeus, very
"terrible;
'Perish folly, else 'tis man's fate'; and the bolt flew unerringly.
Then the kindler stooped; from the torch-car down the measureless
altitudes
Leaned his rayless head, relinquished rein and footing, raised not a
cry.
Like the flower on the river's surface when expanding it vanishes,
Gave his limbs to right and left, quenched: and so fell he precipitate,
Seen of men as a glad rain-fall, sending coolness yet ere it comes:
So he showered above them, shadowed o'er the blue archipelagoes,
O'er the silken-shining pastures of the continents and the isles;
So descending brought revival to the greenery of our earth.

is not easy to grasp what happens, especially at the opening of the poem. As it is one of the finest of his works, I will here briefly illustrate the main outlines of the story.

The scene is laid in the flowery vale of Enna in Sicily, whither Pluto, the God of Hades, had formerly come up in a chariot of darkness to carry off the Maid of Enna, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter the earth-Goddess. Demeter cursed the scene of the rape, and the green valley withered. But many years have passed by, and now again it blooms at spring-time; and in the twilight before dawn the mortal youth Callistes goes out to wait for the sun to rise over the hills that surround the sacred valley and its lake:—

Now the youth footed swift to the dawn.
'Twas the season when wintertide,
In the higher rock-hollows updrawn,
Leaves meadows to bud, and he spied,
By light throwing shallow shade,
Between the beam and the gloom,
Sicilian Enna, whose Maid
Such aspect wears in her bloom
Underneath since the Charioteer
Of Darkness whirled her away,
On a reaped afternoon of the year,
Nigh the poppy-droop of Day.

O and naked of her, all dust,
The majestic Mother and Nurse,
Ringing cries to the God, the Just,
Curled the land with the blight of her curse:

Recollected of this glad isle
Still quaking. But now more fair,
And momently fraying the while
The veil of the shadows there,
Soft Enna that prostrate grief
Sang through, and revealed round the vines,
Bronze-orange, the crisp young leaf,
The wheat-blades tripping in lines,
A hue unillumined by sun
Of the flowers flooding grass as from founts :
All the penetrable dun
Of the morn ere she mounts.

But before the colours of dawn wave in the sky their signal to the colours of earth, the ground is rent and a chariot bursts out of the cave mouth :—

Nor had saffron and sapphire and red
Waved aloft to their sisters below,
When gaped by the rock-channel head
Of the lake, black, a cave at one blow,
Reverberant over the plain :
A sound oft fearfully swung
For the coming of wrathful rain :
And forth, like the dragon-tongue
Of a fire beaten flat by the gale,
But more as the smoke to behold,
A chariot burst.

It carries Persephone, coming up from her unloved Kingdom of Darkness to visit her mother Demeter in the light of the sun. Such was the myth into which the Greeks translated the yearly springing of the corn. Callistes is witness to the meeting of 'the Twain,'—Demeter, the 'great Mother,' 'Our Lady of the Sheaves'; and her daughter

Persephone, the 'Lily of Hades,' the 'mate of the Rayless.' The youth hears their cry of anguish and love as they embrace :—

Then a wail
Quivered high of the love that would fold
Bliss immeasurable, bigger than heart,
Though a God's : and the wheels were stayed,
And the team of the chariot swart
Reared in marble, the six, dismayed,
Like hoofs that by night plashing sea
Curve and ramp from the vast swan-wave :
For, lo, the Great Mother, She !
And Callistes gazed, he gave
His eyeballs up to the sight :
The embrace of the Twain, of whom
To men are their day, their night,
Mellow fruits and the shearing tomb
Our Lady of the Sheaves
And the Lily of Hades, the Sweet
Of Enna : he saw through leaves
The Mother and Daughter meet.

Their embrace suggests to the poet a simile, truly Greek in its simple grandeur :—

They stood by the chariot-wheel,
Embraced, very tall, most like
Fellow poplars, wind-taken, that reel
Down their shivering columns and strike
Head to head, crossing throats : and apart,
For the feast of the look, they drew,
Which Darkness no longer could thwart ;
And they broke together anew.

But Persephone has brought from her dim underworld a grave smile, a smile like sleep that purifies us of our cravings :—

But the mate of the Rayless was grave:
She smiled like Sleep on its flood,
That washes of all we crave:
Like the trance of eyes awake
And the spirit enshrouded, she cast
The wan underworld on the lake.
They were so, and they passed.

When the vision of 'the Twain' has gone by, Callistes recovers his senses and his memory, and sees standing near him a maiden, who had 'slipped from the car':—

And viewing a maiden, he thought
It might now be morn, and afar
Within him the memory wrought
Of a something that slipped from the car
When those, the august, moved by:
Perchance a scarf, and perchance
This maiden. She did not fly,
Nor started at his advance:
She looked, as when infinite thirst
Pants pausing to bless the springs,
Refreshed, unsated. Then first
He trembled with awe of the things
He had seen; and he did transfer,
Divining and doubting in turn,
His reverence unto her;
Nor asked what he crouched to learn:
The whence of her, whither, and why
Her presence there, and her name,
Her parentage: under which sky
Her birth, and how hither she came.

She is in fact Skiageneia, the shadow-born child of Persephone and Pluto; she is the *Daughter of Hades*. She does not love her parent darkness,

And when Mother went Mother to meet,
She was prompted by simple desire
In the day-destined car to have place
At the skirts of the Goddess, unseen,
And be drawn to the dear earth's face.

The rest of the poem describes her *Day* upon Earth, which she passes in company with Callistes. Her father Pluto soon misses her, and when he hears the glad cry with which she greets the rising of the sun, the roar is heard of the angry god, moving in his caverns below :—

Then said she, quick as the cries
Of the rainy cranes : Light ! light !
And Helios rose in her eyes
That were full as the dew-balls bright,
Relucent to him as dews
Unshaded. Breathing, she sent
Her voice to the God of the Muse
And along the vale it went,
Strange to hear : not thin, not shrill :
Sweet, but no young maid's throat :
The echo beyond the hill
Ran falling on half the note :
And under the shaken ground
Where the Hundred-headed groans
By the roots of great Ætna bound,
As of him were hollow tones
Of wondering roared : a tale
Repeated to sunless halls.

But she passes the day in safety, viewing in simple delight the 'corn, wine, fruit, oil,' in the valley ; the 'asphodel woodsides' and the 'pine-forest dark' on the mountain slopes ; and towards evening, climbing with Callistes to the bare summit, where

The island was hers, and the deep,
All heaven, a golden hour.
Then with wonderful voice that rang
Through air as the swan's nigh death,
Of the glory of Light she sang,
She sang of the rapture of Breath.
Nor ever, says he who heard,
Heard Earth in her boundaries broad,
From bosom of singer or bird
A sweetness thus rich of the God
Whose harmonies always are sane.
She sang of furrow and seed,
The burial, birth of the grain,
The growth, and the showers that feed,
And the green blades waxing mature
For the husbandman's armful brown.
O, the song in its burden ran pure,
And burden to song was a crown.
Callistes, a singer, skilled
In the gift he could measure and praise,
By a rival's art was thrilled,
Though she sang but a Song of Days,
Where the husbandman's toil and strife
Little varies to strife and toil :
But the milky kernel of life,
With her numbered : corn, wine, fruit, oil !
The song did give him to eat :
Gave the first rapt vision of Good,
And the fresh young sense of Sweet :
The grace of the battle for food,
With the issue Earth cannot refuse
When men to their labour are sworn.
'Twas a song of the God of the Muse
To the forehead of Morn.

The song betrays her to her father, who comes up in his terrible chariot to fetch her ; day turns to night as in eclipse while Callistes and the maiden

hurry down off the mountain, and stand shuddering by the shore of the Lake of Enna. The dark driver sees them from the further bank and tears his way to them furiously through the waters.

Lo, a chariot, cleaving the storm,
Clove the fountaining lake with a plough,
And the lord of the steeds was in form
He, the God of implacable brow,
Darkness: he: he in person: he raged
Through the wave like a boar of the wilds
From the hunters and hounds disengaged,
And a name shouted hoarsely: his child's.
Horror melted in anguish to hear.
Lo, the wave hissed apart for the path
Of the terrible Charioteer,
With the foam and torn features of wrath,
Hurled aloft on each arm in a sheet;
And the steeds clove it, rushing at land
Like the teeth of the famished at meat.
Then he swept out his hand.

Callistes is left alone, with her name and her cry in his ears.

For men to be profited much
By her day upon earth did he sing:
Of her voice, and her steps, and her touch
On the blossoms of tender Spring.
. . . . . .
But that soul loving earth and the sun
From her home of the shadows he held
For his beacon where beam there is none:
And to join her, or have her brought back,
In his frenzy the singer would call,
Till he followed where never was track,
On the path trod of all.

CHAPTER III

THE PHILOSOPHER AND MORALIST

MR. MEREDITH, I have said, is the inspired prophet of sanity. And as sanity must always defend itself against attacks from many different quarters, his opinion on any subject has more aspects than one. The attempt to compress his view of a question into a single formula involves the neglect of much that he has said. It is wholly beside the mark, for instance, to christen him Optimist or Pessimist, Materialist or Idealist. He does not use the language or think the thoughts which provide us with these terms; and if he did, we should have to define him as belonging to all the camps, or else to none. He is not on the side of religion, or on the side of science, if these words are used in the sense that makes them hostile one to the other. But the essence of religious feeling and the scientific idea of evolution are merged into one to form his view of life. In ethics, he is equally devoted to liberty and to law. He is both stoic and epicurean; joy and duty, self and others, flesh and spirit, each

has a real place in his ordered but progressive conception of right living.

But while his central position shows more than one front against the various eccentricities of human thought, it is, in its own essence, a unity. In his treatment of every question we have the same group of ideas recurring in slightly different forms. All his thought is pervaded by the same general principle, and all his feelings by the same general temperament. On the other hand, as he is not a philosopher but a poet, there is no logical sequence, beginning from one point and ending at another. It is difficult for his commentator to find a suitable order in which to arrange his thoughts, since each springs from the same attitude towards the world, but no one follows from any other as a step in logic. To dress out a poet's view of life in the clothes of a philosophic system, is a task which the present writer is unable even to attempt, and in which success itself would be the worst of all failures, conveying a conception at once disagreeable and erroneous.

There is nothing to regret in this want of philosophic argument. On questions of logic and proof the opinion of the poet is of no special value. Neither is a poet's belief or disbelief in the common religious creeds, a matter of as much significance as is sometimes thought. Wordsworth and Browning, Shelley and Swinburne,

Tennyson or Morris, believe of course, or disbelieve of course. They cannot all be right. And yet we feel that they all have things of value to say on these very subjects, about which they differ among themselves and from the reader. For their attitude to life, their temperament in the face of a Universe which at best and worst is of doubtful countenance, their reading not of the mechanism but of the spirit of Heaven and Earth—these things are what the poets give to the human race as its greatest possession. And in such property England is rich.

Mr. Meredith seems to have felt this distinction. He speaks of Faith as necessary to life, but his Faith is not belief in this or that fact as to the mechanism of the Universe, this or that view of the questions of God or Immortality in the narrower sense. His Faith is an attitude of trust and joy in the good elements of a world which, whatever optimist or pessimist may say, clearly contains both good and evil. This Faith of his is tinged with humorous impatience against that prying temper which he calls

> Unfaith clamouring to be coined
> To faith by proof.[1]

These words are directed, first against those who preach to us that unless certain 'revealed' facts are

[1] *Earth and Man.*

true, the human race is without hope or motive for life; and secondly, against those agnostics who wail over their own doubts and negations, and shiver because they have not knowledge of the unknowable. The details of the mechanism, certainly beyond our knowledge and probably beyond our comprehension, do not interest Mr. Meredith. His Faith, as he himself confesses, is not due to proof. It is due rather to temperament. But that temperament is the right one for men above whose heads is drawn the curtain of the unknown.

There are two sorts of optimism, that of temperament, and that of belief. The use of the same vague word 'optimism' for a temperamental attitude and a cosmological creed is misleading; and it seems to have misled some critics.[1] Optimism of belief often (though certainly not in the case of Browning) results from pessimism of temperament, when a physical or psychical want of joy and courage causes men to rely on philosophical or religious consolations. The pessimist by nature often becomes, by reason of his very sufferings, the optimist in creed. On the other hand the frank acceptance of the fact of an imperfect Universe, an unpurchased devotion to

The dream of the blossom of Good,

[1] See for instance Mr. Pigou's article on 'The Optimism of Browning and Meredith,' *Independent Review*, May 1905.

as our

banner of battle unrolled
In its waver and current and curve,[1]

a devotion calm in the shout for some triumph won, and steadfast amid wounds and death and personal failure,—these are feelings more suited to a nature full to the brim with strength and ardour and joy, like that of Mr. Meredith, or else to stern self-disciplined Ironsides like Huxley or the Carlyle of *Sartor Resartus*. So it is not only logic that decides for each of us his view of the Universe. It is also his nature, the type and quality of his soul. Possibly Mr. Meredith exaggerates the part played by 'brain' in forming the right attitude to life. 'Never is Earth misread by brain,' he says.[2] But it is not 'brain' alone that reads or misreads 'Earth,' but 'blood' and 'spirit,' the health of body and of soul. Mr. Meredith's 'reading of Earth,' like that of every other poet, and probably, if the truth were known, of not a few philosophers, is less the result of the reasoning of his brain—for reason cannot pierce the 'curtain o'er us'—than of the promptings and instincts of his body and soul, of his whole personality. A great philosophy is the summing up of a great man's experience of life.

On the other hand, Mr. Meredith's Faith can

[1] *A Faith on Trial.* [2] *Hard Weather.*

never believe anything which Reason, the brain, shows to be false; nor can it refuse to accept anything which Reason has definitely shown to be true. There must be no playing with supernaturalism. Faith is acceptance as well as hope.

'This enlightened and fearless acceptance of reality and of its laws, enjoined by Reason, is called by the poet Faith. We usually think of Reason and Faith as antagonistic; but it is not true that Faith is to be found in the resignation of Reason. Just as it is not common sense, but dull stupidity, that balks enthusiasm; so true Faith is but Reason herself, transcendent, "tiptoe at the ultimate bound of her wit." The Spirit blossoms from the brain.'[1]

It is essential to grasp the difference between the optimism of creed and the optimism of temperament. It is only in the latter sense that Mr. Meredith is an optimist; in his conception of the way in which the Universe is managed he is largely agnostic.

> What is dumb,
> We question not, nor ask
> The silent to give sound,
> The hidden to unmask,
> The distant to draw near.[2]

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[1] Mr. Cornford's *Poems of George Meredith*, p. 116, supplemental to *Working Men's College Journal*.

[2] *Woodland Peace*.

And not only do we not see, but if we did see we could not understand. If the secret of the Universe were to be proclaimed in words from heaven, the wisest of mankind would no more be able to understand the explanation than one of our simian ancestors could have understood a philosophic poem or a scientific lecture. Shall we then stake our energy and happiness on our ability to solve questions which cannot possibly be answered? Yet such is the course urged to-day by too many of our professional consolers on the one hand, and on the other by those self-appointed discouragers of the human race, the pessimists who, from Empedocles down through Byron to those of our own day, are a source of grim amusement to Mr. Meredith.[1]

It is not by speculation where the path of speculation is barred, but by action and by feeling that we can put ourselves in touch with the heart of goodness, that we can realise the best of life.

> Shall man into the mystery of breath,
> From his quick beating pulse a pathway spy?
> Or learn the secret of the shrouded death,
> By lifting up the lid of a white eye?
> Cleave thou thy way with fathering desire
> Of fire to reach to fire.[2]

He has little sympathy with

[1] See pp. 166-7 below.

[2] *Hymn to Colour.*

The questions that sow not nor spin,
. . . . . .
The questions, the broods that haunt
Sensation insurgent.
. . . . . .
'They see not above or below;
Farthest are they from my soul,'
Earth whispers: 'they scarce have the thirst,
Except to unriddle a rune;
And I spin none; only show,
Would humanity soar from its worst,
Winged above darkness and dole,
How flesh unto spirit must grow.
Spirit raves not for a goal.'[1]

In fact he is not a philosopher at all, in the technical sense of the word. Not only does he not use the logical method of philosophy proper, but he has little sympathy with its spirit of perpetual inquiry. In *The Question Whither*, he writes:—

Then let our trust be firm in Good,
Though we be of the fasting;
Our questions are a mortal brood,
Our work is everlasting.
We children of Beneficence
Are in its being sharers;
And Whither vainer sounds than Whence,
For word with such wayfarers.

In this passage, although he condemns questions in general, he answers the greatest question of all; it is already clear to his Faith that our life is not meaningless, and that we are 'children of beneficence,' not of cruel chance.

[1] *A Faith on Trial.*

And yet his Faith is not in any strict sense optimistic. He does not suppose that beneficence is omnipotent or ubiquitous. But it is one element in the Universe, and we are its children. Precisely how we shall fare in the combat against other elements, we cannot tell. The Universe is an unknown quantity. There is room for almost boundless hope, and Faith in the persistence of good is not contradictory to Reason. Since the Universe, whatever its veiled secret, is all we shall get, it is surely wise to make the best of it, rather than to think the worst. But to say that we are going to make the best of things, is not to say that things ever will be altogether what we could wish.

So far as he makes statements at all, Mr. Meredith takes the common-sense middle position, which is far from either optimism or pessimism. But the body of his ethical doctrine is larger and more important than his necessarily vague cosmology, which at its best is only a poetical form to convey the essence and temperament of his ethic; and since his ethic is not as dour as Carlyle's, he has been labelled an optimist. He preaches acceptance and joy as a part of duty. He has written, as it were, a new edition of *Sartor*, with joy superadded. With him, the flower blooms on the rock. But, even in his ethic, the rock is always there, under the flower.

He who has looked upon Earth,
Deeper than flower and fruit,
Losing some hue of his mirth,
As the tree striking rock at the root,
Unto him shall the marvellous tale
Of Callistes more humanly come
With the touch on his breast than a hail
From the markets that hum.[1]

And because he is an optimist in his ethic and in his temperament, people seem therefore to expect Mr. Meredith to produce some proven scheme of pleasant cosmology, and have a grievance against him when none is forthcoming. We are so much accustomed to look for creeds, for short cuts to contentment by some other route than our own conduct and courage, that we will not believe that a man can teach us to live healthy lives, unless he has some patent medicine in his pocket. But, in fact, if we would digest the Universe, we must trust, not to drugs, but to exercise, clean living, and cheerfulness.

Mr. Meredith's conception of life stands out in likeness and in contrast to that of Wordsworth. Each had a poetical philosophy claiming to interpret the face of nature, and each was certainly inspired to success in literature by perpetual and loving contact with Earth in all her moods. But

[1] *The Day of the Daughter of Hades.*

Wordsworth was constrained by his beliefs to despise the breast upon which he fed his soul. In the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*, he gave the finest expression to the old orthodox view that we are children, not of Earth, but of Heaven. To Wordsworth, sojourn in this life here was an exile:

> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home.

Earth was not the mother, but only the foster-nurse.

> The homely nurse doth all she can
> To make her foster-child, her inmate, Man,
> Forget the glories he hath known
> And that imperial palace whence he came.

Wordsworth supposed that his 'high instincts,' 'the fountain-light of all his day,' were not inherited from Earth, but implanted in him from Heaven above.

Not so Mr. Meredith. To him Earth is the Mother; the mighty pronoun 'she' perpetually recurs in his poems, sometimes rather to the bewilderment of the uninitiated. Since Wordsworth's day, it has been shown by science that man has literally been evolved out of Earth, the son out of the mother. Man's spirit and brain, no less than his body, says Mr. Meredith, are earth-born. We are not dropped down from Heaven

above. We are autochthonous. Earth, of which we are a part, is spirit as well as matter, flame as well as clod. What is spiritual comes out of Earth, as well as what is fleshly. To some this may seem a mere dispute over words. But whether we regard it as fact or metaphor, this idea has been used by Mr. Meredith to illustrate all his most important conceptions in philosophy and in ethics. He uses Earth as the sanction for all his moral precepts, just as other poets and preachers have so used Heaven. The ethical laws which he himself approves, the temperament of common sense fired by enthusiasm and controlled by humour, he poetically speaks of as 'the reading of Earth.' Some may think that the value of the lessons he would enforce is not much enhanced by the alleged sanction of Earth. They may think that it is really much the same as the more usual formula of the sanction of Heaven, and that it has equally much or equally little weight.

Be that as it may, he says that the true heroes of the human race, those who conquer self and serve their fellows, 'touch purest,'

> Because their love of Earth is deep.[1]

Such a love would scarce 'have been held in high esteem with Paul'! Here is a gulf between the

[1] *The Lark Ascending.*

doctrine of Mr. Meredith and that of the Apostle of the Gentiles; but it is not quite so wide as appears at first sight, because they use the word Earth in two very different senses. To Mr. Meredith, Earth contains Heaven:—it is that part of Heaven which is our home. The whole Universe is spirit as well as matter; and in every part of it good and evil are mixed, not segregated. But the only part that we know is our dear Mother Earth. And though like everything else she is not wholly beneficent, though we have to watch

> her double visage, double voice,

still it is she

> who bore us,
> And is our only visible friend.[1]

To learn anything of cosmic or ethical laws we must observe what happens on the breast of Earth, because she is the only part of the Universe subject to our observation; also because we who are her children have it in our nature to read the language of her other children, our brothers the seas, mountains, streams, woods, flowers, the animals and men. How did Paul or Wordsworth or any other seeker after God fill his soul with Faith in Heaven, and his heart with love of his fellow beings, save by observing the silence of the desert, the heaving of the sea, the lift of the

[1] *Spirit of Earth in Autumn*, p. 229 below.

mountains through the cloud-rift to the stars, the growth of the vineyard, the shepherd and the lambs, and most of all Earth's 'great venture Man'!

> Our Earth we have seen
> Beneath and on surface, her deeds and designs;
> Who gives us the man-loving Nazarene,
> The martyrs, the poets, the corn and the vines.[1]

'We do not get to any heaven by renouncing the Mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is best to believe that Earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations.'[2]

Then, too, there are those other Earths, the stars, akin to our Mother and to us. We do not know how many of them have living progeny and are the seat of intellectual being. But in infinite space there must also be infinite life, however thinly it may be scattered over the shoreless desert. For if the desert has no end, there can be no end to its springs and its palm-trees. Thus by observing the stars, even if in no other way, is quelled the fear that good will not be eternal, that 'the dream of the blossom of good' can ever perish, even if after millions of years our Earth were to suffer shipwreck in the heavens, or freeze out its crew and float derelict. So in Mr. Meredith's *Meditation under Stars*,

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[1] *The Empty Purse.*

[2] *Lord Ormont*, chap. xiv.

To deeper than this ball of sight
Appeal the lustrous people of the night.

To gaze on them is to read hopes kindred to our Earth's, but larger, infinite in space and time.

The issues known in us, our unsolved solved:
That there with toil Life climbs the self-same Tree.
. . . . . .
So may we read, and little find them cold:
Not frosty lamps illumining dead space,
Not distant aliens, not senseless Powers.
The fire is in them whereof we are born;
The music of their motion may be ours.
Spirit shall deem them beckoning Earth and voiced
Sisterly to her, in her beams rejoiced.
Of love, the grand impulsion, we behold
The love that lends her grace
Among the starry fold.
Then at new flood of customary morn,
Look at her through her showers,
Her mists, her streaming gold,
A wonder edges the familiar face:
She wears no more that robe of printed hours;
Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.

Weigh well the meaning of this last beautiful line, on which the poem closes.

Except for these distant glimpses of other worlds of which we know little more than what we can guess from the fact of their kinship to ourselves, 'our only visible friend' is our own Mother Earth. It is she who leads us to perceive what we call God

and Heaven, the powers of spiritual beneficence which are in us, and in everything else in proportion as it is good. To reach to what Mr. Meredith calls the 'Spiritual God' we must study man, and hold communion with Nature; we must 'read Earth.'

> She has been slain by the narrow-brain,
> But for us who love her she lives again.
> . . . . . .
> She can lead us, only she,
> Unto God's footstool, whither she reaches;
> Loved, enjoyed her gifts must be;
> Reverenced the truths she teaches.[1]

God is identified, not with all Nature, but with the good elements in her, which it is the task of man to bring to full and conscious life in himself, by the hard process of evolution, the education of blood and tears. God is immanent in Nature and in man, but at first very dimly, like the statue in the rough block of quarried marble. And it is only by a terrible path and slow that man can find God. The sufferings by which callow youth wins wisdom and strength, if the victim is not broken to pieces in the process of the Ordeal, are the central theme of Mr. Meredith's novels. And personal history is the epitome of the history of the race. Man's growth is slow as the æons, to be counted in geologic periods. Not to realise this makes us

[1] *Spirit of Earth in Autumn*, see pp. 229-231 below.

doubt of progress. 'History has to be taken from far backwards if we would gain assurance of man's advance.'[1] And in the earlier stages the path is stained with the sacrifice of such thousands as are now falling slain, the price of Russia's first step out of the 'haunting night.' By such red track has man ever found his way upward towards first light, though in other countries, now civilised and free, he

> Has half transferred the battle to his brain
> From bloody ground.[2]

Thus in our own English cities, where 'order' and 'anarchy' reign under forms less bloody than in Warsaw, our present anarchic Order demands the dwarfed lives, the perverted energies, the sick misery of millions, and, while it makes an enforced hecatomb of the mass of men and women, calls the bravest and best and most fortunate to voluntary self-sacrifice. In London, only less than in Warsaw, Earth is still

> A slayer, yea, as when she pressed
> Her savage to the slaughter-heaps;
> To sacrifice she prompts her best:
> She reaps them as the sower reaps.[3]

Seeing that there is progress, Faith accepts the horrors of the path forward. In this sense, 'acceptance' is Earth's command.

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[1] *Lord Ormont*, chap. iv.
[2] *Earth and Man.*
[3] *Thrush in February.*

Accept, she says; it is not hard
In woods; but she in towns
Repeats, accept; and have we wept,
And have we quailed with fears,
Or shrunk with horrors, sure reward
We have whom knowledge crowns;
Who see in mould the rose unfold,
The soul through blood and tears.[1]

Nature is not altogether moral—to say so would be downright optimism and blindness to facts—but the moral part of her, which we call God, is both in man and also outside him. Therefore even at the worst, man's 'mastering mind' refuses to surrender to despair and burns upward to God—

The Great Unseen, nowise the Dark Unknown.
To whom unwittingly did he aspire
In wilderness, where bitter was his need:
To whom in blindness, as an earthy seed
For light and air, he struck through crimson mire.[2]

God is this ethical progress. He is both the means and the end. There is no notion of a God in the sky more than on the Earth: for 'the spiritual is the palpable illumed.'[3] So too the idea of a definite term set to evolution, a golden age, a heaven on earth or above the clouds, a final victory, a consummation either in or out of time—all these ideas are wholly alien to Mr. Meredith's philosophy.

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[1] *Outer and Inner.*
[2] *Reading of Life* (1901), p. 35, 'Test of Manhood.'
[3] *Ibid.*

Spirit raves not for a goal,[1]

he says, thereby contradicting many teachers of religion.

> There is an end to joy: there is no end
> To striving; therefore let us strive
> In purity that shall the toil befriend,
> And keep our poor mortality alive.[2]

Earth is

> The sower's bed, but not the reaper's rest.[3]

At no moment, he warns us, let any man think that he has achieved his task or attained to wisdom. A sage, if he ceases to struggle and to grow with the years, resting on the reputation that he has won with himself for wisdom; a creed if it will not strive always to new truth, but prefers to pose on a height, supposing itself perfect; both these are dry of the real sap of life. But—

> Rich labour is the struggle to be wise
> While we make sure the struggle cannot cease.[4]

In the progress of man, both of the race and of the individual, there can be no final halting-place.[5] Man's

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[1] *A Faith on Trial.* [2] *Vittoria*, chap. xxi.

[3] *Ode to Youth in Memory.*

[4] Sonnet, *The Discipline of Wisdom.*

[5] Perhaps it is not fanciful to read something of this favourite idea of Mr. Meredith's into the last stanza of the *Song of Theodolind* at the furnace, though there, of course, it takes a mystical and mediæval form, suitable to the ideas of the saintly queen:

prize from tidal battles lost or won,
Reveals the scheme to animate his race:
How that it is a warfare but begun;
Unending; with no Power to interpose;
No prayer save for a strength to keep his ground,
Heard of the Highest; never battle's close,
The victory complete and victor crowned;
Nor solace in defeat, save from that sense
Of strength well spent, which is the strength renewed.
In manhood must he find his competence;
In his clear mind the spiritual food;
God being there while he his fight maintains;
Throughout his mind the Master Mind being there,
While he rejects the suicide despair;
Accepts the spur of explicable pains.[1]

This attitude is both like and unlike that of Browning. It is like it in the joy with which strife is not only accepted, but embraced. Man, we are told, is

a creature matched with strife
To meet it as a bride.[2]

Meredith, like his brother poet, is

One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break.

Never for the Chosen peace!
Know, by me tormented know,
Never shall the wrestling cease
Till with our outlasting Foe
Red of heat to white of heat,
Roll we to the Godhead's feet!
Beat, beat! white of heat,
Red of heat, beat, beat!

[1] *Reading of Life*, pp. 35-6, 'Test of Manhood.
[2] *Earth and Man.*

In strenuousness and temperamental optimism the two are alike.[1] But there is this difference, that Meredith expects 'no power to interpose,' and does not prophesy perfection, or 'a rest for the people of God' either in the next world or in this. To his mind, Earth's 'goal of goals' is not a millennium in the distant future, but the satisfactory lives of the best men and women in each passing generation. There is no Kingdom of God promised, before which there will be no satisfaction, and after which no ground for complaint. Far otherwise. There is an irregular advance up the path of progress, along whose banks the joys and goods are strewn, free to be gathered by each wayfarer as he forces his way along, toiling, suffering, living, rejoicing. Each is to help himself, and also to clear a foot of pathway for his companions, and for those who are to follow. Surely this is not only common sense, but true religion.

It is not always easy to define the meaning attached by Mr. Meredith to the words Earth and Nature. Sometimes Earth means the planet Earth; sometimes it is merely a poetical phrase for the ethical precept which he is laying down.

[1] Mr. Meredith's sympathy with, and deep admiration for, Browning's spirit and character are expressed in the lines *On Hearing the News from Venice* of his death, p. 288, vol. iii. of Poems in the Limited Collected Edition.

These two uses of the word often cause a confusion, but a confusion which answers to the mixed good and bad in the real facts of the Universe. For he regards the planet Earth and the Nature of which she is a cognate part, not as wholly good but only as containing good elements. And yet he says that we are to 'accept' her, to 'obey her laws.' True obedience is, of course, due only to the good elements in Nature. Yet in one sense there is need for obedience and acceptance in relation to the bad elements also. For we must render the homage of hostility to evil. We must accept the bad conditions of life as facts, and regulate our conduct in adverse recognition of them. We cannot enjoy the liberty which would rightly be ours in a perfect Universe. It is not a world where

> Love is an unerring light,
> And joy its own security.

Here Mr. Meredith is on the side of Wordsworth rather than of the poets

> who, in love and truth
> Where no misgiving is, rely
> Upon the genial sense of youth.

His ideas of Duty are less formal and more vital than those of the Lake school, but he knows better than Shelley and Browning that the laws of conduct necessitated by the imperfect conditions of Nature often run counter to our 'natural' impulses

and must be preferred to them under penalty. Man should be

> Obedient to Nature, not her slave:
> Her lord, if to her rigid laws he bows,
> Her dust, if with his conscience he plays knave.
> And bids the Passions on the Pleasures browse.[1]

The God in Nature bids us study the Devil in her: for if we do not, that gentleman will some day take us by surprise. None of us can avoid dealings with him of one sort or another, so the attempt to be a pure fool is fraught with danger. The fool builds his paradise cruelly at the expense of others, and he himself will not find safe shelter there for a whole lifetime.

In this sense God is law. And through law comes the strength of character by which alone men and nations can survive:—

> Lo, Strength is of the plain root-Virtues born:
> Strength ye shall gain by service, prove in scorn,
> Train by endurance, by devotion shape.
> Strength is not won by miracle or rape.
> It is the offspring of the modest years,
> The gift of sire to son, *thro' those firm laws*
> *Which we name Gods;* which are the righteous cause.
> The cause of man, and manhood's ministers.[2]

God, as law, bids us observe that no action can

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[1] *A Reading of Life* (1901), p. 36: *The Test of Manhood.*

[2] *Odes on French History* (1898), pp. 61-2: *France, December 1870.*

fail of its consequences. Men can forgive each other, but deeds never forgive. The person whom you have wronged may pardon you, but the crime which he has pardoned will take some blind vengeance, either on you or on others. It is an engine which you have set going and cannot stop. Mr. Meredith's novels are so many different instances of this law at work. When the sympathies of the reader have followed Richard Feverel through half the story, up to the high topgallant of his joy, the author suddenly turns round on him and on us, and prepares us for the ruin that is to follow, in these words dealing with the seizure of happiness at the expense of others :—

'When we have gone out and seized it on the highways, certain inscrutable laws are sure to be at work to bring us to the criminal bar, sooner or later. . . . Richard Turpin went forth, singing "Money or life" to the world: Richard Feverel has done the same, substituting "Happiness" for "Money," frequently synonyms. The coin he wanted he would have, and was just as much a highway robber as his fellow Dick, so that those who have failed to recognise him as a hero before, may now regard him in that light. Meanwhile the world he has squeezed looks exceedingly patient and beautiful. His coin chinks delicious music to him. Nature and the order of things on earth have no warmer admirer than

a jolly brigand or a young man made happy by the Jews.'[1]

But Lucy also, who was innocent, suffered for the sins of Richard and his father. If that is God's justice, what are we to think of God? It would seem that the judicial power is shared between Him and another—the Black Adversary. God calls our attention to the law, but the law itself was not drawn up wholly by Him. Since, then, the powers responsible for the iron law of consequences are pagan deities, Mr. Meredith calls them, not 'God,' but 'the Gods.' Their memories are long, and they visit the sins of the fathers upon the children. Earth had healed and forgotten the wounds made by France under the first Napoleon upon the bleeding body of Europe:—

> . . . green earth forgets.
> The gay young generations mask her grief;
> Where bled her children hangs the loaded sheaf.

But 'the Gods' remembered and after more than fifty years, revenged:—

> Forgetful is green earth; the Gods alone
> Remember everlastingly: they strike
> Remorselessly, and ever like for like.
> By their great memories the Gods are known.[2]

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[1] *Richard Feverel*, chap. xxxii. For the same idea, behind a comic mask, see his poem on Victor Hugo's *Hernani*.

[2] *Odes on French History*, p. 60: *France*, 1870.

This law, which applies to the affairs not only of nations, but of men and women, cannot be learnt too early in life. A wrong thing done breeds evil and sets it afloat on the world, blindly destructive of the just and unjust. Our misdeeds punish others besides ourselves. If there is any heart of goodness in a man, that consideration, above all else, drives him to virtue. If we could each of us see the sum of evil for which he or she is really responsible, we should all turn with horror from our faults. But as we have a sluggish imagination, we need a great novelist to illuminate our conscience. The demonstration of consequences is the new weapon against sin ready to the hand of preachers, whenever they have the wit to use it, instead of those old terrors of Hell which have fizzled out in their hand, and vanished with too theatrical a stench. This world is made hot enough for sinners and their victims, Mr. Meredith would have us see.

'The Gods' are often good schoolmasters, though their interest in the pupils be of the slightest. There is

> The lesson writ in red since first Time ran,
> A hunter hunting down the beast in man:
> That till the chasing out of its last vice
> The flesh was fashioned but for sacrifice.[1]

France in December 1870 is to Mr. Meredith the

[1] *Odes on French History*, p. 65: *France*, 1870.

type of mankind brought back to reason by the punishment of the cruel 'Gods.' It is so that the following passage ought to be read. The subject is France, but she stands for all humanity and for each one of us :—

> Mother of Reason is she, trebly cursed,
> To feel, to see, to justify the blow ;
> Chamber to chamber of her sequent brain
> Gives answer of the cause of her great woe,
> Inexorably echoing thro' the vaults,
> ''Tis thus they reap in blood, in blood who sow :
> This is the sum of self-absolvëd faults.'
> . . . . . .
> The high strong light within her, tho' she bleeds,
> Traces the letters of returned misdeeds.
> She sees what seed long sown, ripened of late,
> Bears this fierce crop ; and she discerns her fate
> From origin to agony, and on
> As far as the wave washes long and wan
> Off one disastrous impulse : for of waves
> Our life is, and *our deeds are pregnant graves*
> *Blown rolling to the sunset from the dawn.*

Such was Mr. Meredith's Faith in Earth, and such too his love of France, that even in that month of horror five-and-thirty years ago, when he wrote these words, even then he knew that she would rise again purified from the bed of agony :—

> Still the Gods love her, for that of high aim
> Is this good France, the bleeding thing they stripe.
> She shall rise worthier of her prototype
> Thro' her abasement deep ; the pain that runs
> From nerve to nerve some victory achieves.
> They lie like circle-strewn soaked Autumn-leaves

Which stain the forest scarlet, her fair sons !
And of their death her life is.

And so it has proved ; let us have Faith that it will prove so with Russia, and have patience to wait the long issue.

For man, in private and in public life,—

What hope is there?
'Tis that in each recovery, he preserves,
Between his upper and his nether wit,
Sense of his march ahead, more brightly lit ;
He less the shaken thing of lusts and nerves ;
With such a grasp upon his brute as tells
Of wisdom from that vile relapsing spun.
A Sun goes down in wasted fire, a Sun
Resplendent springs, to faith refreshed compels.[1]

These thoughts are not offered us as an explanation or justification of evil. Let no one charge Mr. Meredith with such folly. But they show that in this imperfect world some evils, at least, serve a useful purpose in educating all those who are capable of learning any lesson at all. This idea has been a favourite with Mr. Meredith since early youth. It is nearly as old as his authorship ; and he has often put it in a comic form. Half a century has passed since he wrote in the conclusion of the *Shaving of Shagpat* :—

Ye that nourish hopes of fame !
Ye who would be known in song !
Ponder old history, and duly frame
Your souls to meek acceptance of the thong.

[1] *Reading of Life : Test of Manhood.*

Lo! of hundreds who aspire,
Eighties perish—nineties tire!
They who bear up, in spite of wrecks and wracks,
Were season'd by celestial hail of thwacks.

Fortune in this mortal race
Builds on thwackings for its base;
Thus the All-Wise doth make a flail a staff,
And separates his heavenly corn from chaff.

The growth of the undesirable young, through suffering, to spiritual manhood is the principal *motif* of his novels. In *Sandra Belloni* he says of Wilfrid :—

'One may also be a gallant fellow, and harsh, exacting, double-dealing, and I know not what besides, in youth. The question asked by nature is, "Has he the heart to take and keep an impression?" For, if he has, circumstances will force him on and carve the figure of a brave man out of that mass of contradictions. In return for such benefits, he pays forfeit commonly of the dearest of the things prized by him in this terrestrial life. Whereat, albeit created man by her, he reproaches nature, and the sculptor, circumstance; forgetting that to make him man is their sole duty.'[1]

Mr. Meredith's Faith is not based on any extravagantly high opinion of the present world of men. True wisdom seems the exception among them, and so the education of suffering is only too neces-

[1] *Sandra Belloni*, chap. xiii.

sary. This makes him take a lenient view of the slow and irregular pace of the *World's Advance*:—

> Judge mildly the tasked world; and disincline
> To brand it, for it bears a heavy pack.

Its path of progress is seldom direct, but swerves first to one side, then to another, like the drunkard's, when

> He plays diversions on the homeward line,
> Still that way bent albeit his legs are slack:
> A hedge may take him, but he turns not back,
> Nor turns this burdened world, of curving spine.

Such is the *World's Advance*: and the Mind's Ascent likewise is 'spiral,' not straight up to the mark; so that alternate extravagances in opposite directions may lead at last to wisdom. To understand the reality of progress we must hear

> 'History speak, of what men were,
> And have become.'[1]

And therefore, in spite of modern pessimism, he thinks that the knowledge of history and the ideas of evolution which distinguish our latter days, have on the whole cheered man more than disheartened; they have banished the 'spectral enemy' which loomed so large in devil-ridden minds terrorised by superstitions now generally repudiated:—

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[1] Sonnet, *Earth's Secret.*

The spectral enemy lost form ;
The traversed wilderness exposed its track.
He felt the far advance in looking back ;
Thence trust in his foot forward through the storm.[1]

Since God is the law of ethical evolution, prayer, in the sense of asking for particular boons, seems to Mr. Meredith not only useless but unworthy. Such prayer is born of 'the hungers and desires.' But we must read Earth 'past desires and fears, before 'the letters on her breast are spelt.'[2] Our ethical progress is independent of the gratification of our wishes. The craving for more than we have got only serves to hinder our enjoyment and realisation of what we have. It rests with ourselves whether to enjoy what we have or to pine for what we have not :—

You of any well that springs
May unfold the heaven of things ;
Have it homely and within,
And thereof its likeness win,
Will you so in soul's desire.[3]

Prayer that the course of things may be altered is utterly vain. When in December 1870 one half of France rushed to the churches to pray for some miracle to turn back the 'stout marching Schoolmen of the North,' the English friend of the stricken nation wrote thus :—

[1] *Reading of Life*, p. 33 : *The Test of Manhood.*
[2] *Thrush in February.* [3] *Woods of Westermain.*

> Could France accept the fables of her priests,
> Who blest her banners in this game of beasts,
> And now bid hope that heaven will intercede
> To violate its laws in her sore need,
> She would find comfort in their opiates:
> Mother of Reason! can she cheat the Fates?

Surely, he says, France,

> The Mother of the many laughters might
> Call one poor shade of laughter

to show herself the naked absurdity of her attitude,

> Demanding intercession, direct aid,
> When the whole tragic tale hangs on a broken Blade![1]

But prayer in another sense Mr. Meredith considers the highest function of the soul, the source of life to it and the spring of conduct. 'Prayer is power within us to communicate with the desired beyond our thirsts.'[2] Or, in the words of Shrapnel, the old radical and free-thinker, to his friend Beauchamp, in the famous letter read aloud with snorts of rage by the military Churchgoers in the Tory drawing-room:—

'"So, in our prayers we dedicate the world to God, not calling him great for a title, no—showing him we know him great in a limitless world, lord of a truth we tend to, have not grasped. I say Prayer is good. I counsel it to you again and

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[1] *Odes on French History*, p. 62: *France, December* 1870.
[2] *Lord Ormont*, chap. xiv.

again: in joy, in sickness of heart. The infidel will not pray; the creed-slave prays to the image in his box."

"'I've had enough!" Colonel Halkett ejaculated.

"'We," Captain Baskelett put out his hand for silence with an ineffable look of entreaty, for here was Shrapnel's hypocrisy in full bloom: "we make prayer a part of us, praying for no gifts, no interventions; through the faith in prayer opening the soul to the undiscerned. And take this, my Beauchamp, for the good in prayer, that it makes us repose on the unknown with confidence, makes us flexible to change, makes us ready for revolution—for life, then! He who has the fountain of prayer in him will not complain of hazards. Prayer is the recognition of laws; the soul's exercise and source of strength; its thread of conjunction with them. Prayer for an object is the cajolery of an idol; the resource of superstition. There you misread it, Beauchamp. We that fight the living world must have the universal for succour of the truth in it. Cast forth the soul in prayer, you meet the effluence of the outer truth, you join with the creative elements giving breath to you; and that crust of habit which is the soul's tomb; and custom, the soul's tyrant; and pride, our volcano-peak that sinks us in a crater; and fear, which plucks the feathers from the wings of the soul and sits it naked and shivering in a vault, where the passing of a common hodman's foot above sounds like the king of terrors coming,—you are free of them, you live in the day and for

the future, by this exercise and discipline of the soul's faith."'[1]

Such are the words of Shrapnel. And Mr. Meredith, speaking in his own person to the young politician to whom he delivers the sermon of *The Empty Purse*, says :—

> If courage should falter, 'tis wholesome to kneel.
> Remember that well, for the secret with some,
> Who pray for no gift, but have cleansing in prayer,
> And free from impurities tower-like stand.

Such prayer does not depend on any definitions of God, or any attribution of personality to Him. In solitude, or at least in silence, as harmonious as solitude, such prayer rises, not to the lips, but in the heart. It is known in churches, in chambers and in the streets. But in communion with the beauty, the strength and the vitality of nature, the face of our Mother Earth and of the sky, prayer comes in its greatest power.[2] The active and the physically joyous, like George Meredith, know the state often at the end of a long day's walk, when soul and body live together. As the traveller hastes towards evening the stars come out one by one, speaking 'unworded things and old':—

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[1] *Beauchamp's Career*, chap. xxix.

[2] For one of the finest expressions of such prayer see the fine passage in Richard Jefferies' *Story of My Heart* (Longman's Silver Library), pp. 4-8.

Sharp is the night, but stars with frost alive
Leap off the rim of earth across the dome.
It is a night to make the heavens our home
More than the nest whereto apace we strive.
Lengths down our road each fir-tree seems a hive,
In swarms outrushing from the golden comb.
They waken waves of thoughts that burst to foam:
The living throb in me, the dead revive.
Yon mantle clothes us: there, past mortal breath,
Life glistens on the river of the death.
It folds us, flesh and dust; and have we knelt,
Or never knelt, or eyed as kine the springs
Of radiance, the radiance enrings:
And this is the soul's haven to have felt.[1]

It is the haven of the soul to feel that 'radiance' surrounds us. Perhaps too, we may call that other meditation addressed to *The Star Sirius* a 'prayer,' an aspiration towards ethical grandeur of soul: at least it renders Mr. Meredith's idea of 'the happy warrior':—

Bright Sirius! that when Orion pales
To dotlings under moonlight still art keen
With cheerful fervour of a warrior's mien
Who holds in his great heart the battle-scales:
Unquenched of flame though swift the flood assails,
Reducing many lustrous to the lean:
Be thou my star, and thou in me be seen
To show what source divine is, and prevails.
Long watches through, at one with godly night,
I mark thee planting joy in constant fire;
And thy quick beams, whose jets of life inspire
Life to the spirit, passion for the light,
Dark Earth since first she lost her lord from sight
Has viewed and felt them sweep her as a lyre.

[1] *Winter Heavens.*

It is no simple matter to account for all the various emotions which men feel in the presence of animate and inanimate nature. To analyse them with any certainty, we should require a knowledge of the real attributes of the world outside man, which we do not possess, and about which our philosophers are eternally divided. But modern pessimism agrees with the older orthodoxy in denying the relationship of Earth to humankind. Nature, it is said, is wholly alien to us, and hostile to our endeavour after the ideal; that endeavour resides in the heart of man alone. In *The Story of My Heart*[1] Richard Jefferies admits that the inspiration of his 'soul-life' comes in its fulness only when he is in company with Nature, but he refuses to believe that Nature has any real part in the inspiration:—

'Sometimes a very ecstasy of exquisite enjoyment of the entire visible universe filled me. I was aware that in reality the feeling and the thought were in me, and not in the earth or sun; yet I was most conscious of it when in company with these.'

No doubt this is true, in the sense that neither the Earth nor the Sun is a conscious personality; but is it altogether true that the whole Earth contains nothing answering to the feelings which

[1] *Story of My Heart*, pp. 199-200, and *passim*.

the sight of it so often evokes in the soul of man? Mr. Meredith believes himself to be aware of a real kinship with one part at least of nature—the animals and the growing plants.[1] In the sympathy that we feel with them and in their blood-relationship to us, he finds an extension outside humanity of what he calls 'Earth's design.' There is of course no 'design' formed consciously by Earth; the phrase is poetic. But there are laws of nature which have produced both the living things and man. Our common life which we share with the animals and the woods, explains our sympathy with them. It is not merely their beauty, but their vitality, that appeals to us. The crocus thrusting up her yellow finger between the patches of snow, is not only a symbol but a part of life itself. The sap rising in the trees is not alien to the blood coursing in our veins. The pushing crocus and the budding tree appeal to us by our common fundamental nature. The lush and tangled greenery of the hedge alive with birds and insects, the constant sprouting of fresh life from the decaying leaf-mould of past years, the wet warm smell of it all, are near and dear to the body and the soul of man. His desire for rural sights and sounds, for the clothed and watered hills, the flowers and the woods, is something akin to sexual attraction. We love the

[1] See *Melampus*, and *Outer and Inner*.

spring-time, not merely because then we see the most beautiful combination of shades of green. Old Chaucer knew why we love the spring! Spring, he said, was the time—

> Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
> The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
> . . . . . .
> And smale fowles maken melodye,
> That slepen al the night with open yë,
> (So priketh hem nature in hir corages).

For such reasons, Mr. Meredith's love of the fields and woods is more intimate than his love of nature in its larger aspect. While 'the old face of dawn' is to him the great allegory of life, the fields and woods are much more than an allegory; they are a replica of ourselves, on a far lower plane indeed, but charged with beauty and peace wanting to our life's struggle. The woodland on a quiet summer's evening at the approach of night is nearest to paradise.

> Sweet as Eden is the air,
> And Eden-sweet the ray.
> No Paradise is lost for them
> Who foot by branching root and stem,
> And lightly with the woodland share
> The change of night and day.

Such a place and hour seems in temper with his agnostic philosophy of Faith and Love, that accepts the renewal of life in fresh forms through

the death of the old, but does not pretend to know the inmost secret of things. He reads this attitude to life in the perpetual patient fall and growth of the woodland :—

Here all say,
We serve her, even as I :
We brood, we strive to sky,
We gaze upon decay,
We wot of life through death,
How each feeds each we spy ;
And is a tangle round,
Are patient ; what is dumb,
We question not, nor ask
The silent to give sound,
The hidden to unmask,
The distant to draw near.

And this the woodland saith :
I know not hope or fear ;
I take whate'er may come ;
I raise my head to aspects fair,
From foul I turn away.

Sweet as Eden is the air,
And Eden-sweet the ray.[1]

And he loves the woods no less as the home of the birds, animals, and insects. Such was the mood of 'the good physician Melampus' :—

With love exceeding a simple love of the things
That glide in grasses and rubble of woody wreck ;
Or change their perch on a beat of quivering wings
From branch to branch, only restful to pipe and peck ;

[1] *Woodland Peace*

Or, bristled, curl at a touch their snouts in a ball;
Or cast their web between bramble and thorny hook;
The good physician Melampus, loving them all,
Among them walked, as a scholar who reads a book.[1]

The low stir in the brushwood to which we listen hour by hour in the perfect midday silence, breeds fancy as well as thought:—

I neighbour the invisible
So close that my consent
Is only asked for spirits masked
To leap from trees and flowers.
And this because with them I dwell
In thought, while calmly bent
To read the lines dear Earth designs
Shall speak her life on ours.[2]

There is no wonder then that, in his *Woods of Westermain*, he chooses a forest to stand allegorically for human life,—a haunted forest, beautiful and homely to those who have no fear, but madly terrible to those who 'quaver at a dread of dark.' As the piece goes on, it becomes a book of ethical proverbs, a poetical *Pilgrim's Scrip*, a shower of characteristic precepts loosely held together by continual reference to the allegory of the woods, wherein lurks the enchantment for the lover of poetry. But I shall here quote only the first verses, which can be read without reference to the allegory, as mere description of a haunted wood:—

---

[1] *Melampus.*

[2] *Outer and Inner.*

I

Enter these enchanted woods,
You who dare,
Nothing harms beneath the leaves
More than waves a swimmer cleaves.
Toss your heart up with the lark,
Foot at peace with mouse and worm,
Fair you fare.
Only at a dread of dark
Quaver, and they quit their form:
Thousand eyeballs under hoods
Have you by the hair.
Enter these enchanted woods,
You who dare.

II

Here the snake across your path
Stretches in his golden bath:
Mossy-footed squirrels leap
Soft as winnowing plumes of Sleep:
Yaffles on a chuckle skim
Low to laugh from branches dim:
Up the pine, where sits the star,
Rattles deep the moth-winged jar.
Each has business of his own;
But should you distrust a tone,
Then beware.
Shudder all the haunted roods,
All the eyeballs under hoods
Shroud you in their glare.
Enter these enchanted woods,
You who dare.

The sea, the rocks, the desert, the outline of the distant landscape attract us scarcely less than the flowers and the woods, but, I think, in a very

different way. Their attraction is partly their beauty of form, but partly also their strength, sometimes of gigantic turbulence, sometimes of infinite peace. By gazing on the greater forces of nature we ourselves attain the strength and calm which is the chief characteristic of their outward appearance, and which (perhaps by a pathetic fallacy) we attribute to them as their real qualities. It is Matthew Arnold who thus addresses 'Nature' in the High Alps:—

To thee only God granted
A heart ever new—
To all always open,
To all always true.
Ah! calm me, restore me;
And dry up my tears
On thy high mountain-platforms,
Where morn first appears;
Where the white mists, for ever
Are spread and upfurl'd—
In the stir of the forces
Whence issued the World.[1]

But this calm exaltation of the soul in the presence of the grander outlines of landscape and the larger forces of nature, is very different from the sense of kinship with growing things, and of the life, decay and re-birth which man shares with the animals and the woods.

Mr. Meredith's view of the mutual relations of

[1] *Switzerland*, 2.

Earth and Man is set out in the poem of that name. In the interpretation of it, there is no reason to suppose that he regards our planet as possessing conscious personality. But he wishes to lay stress, first on the fact of man's genesis out of Earth, and next on the right temperament towards life which he calls 'the reading of Earth.'

The opening verses poetically shadow forth the real conditions of man's evolution. The mother on whose breast he has his being, is

> His well of strength, his home of rest,
> And fair to scan.

But—

> More aid than that embrace,
> That nourishment, she cannot give: his heart
> Involves his fate; and she who urged the start
> Abides the race.
>
> For he is in the lists
> Contentious with the elements, whose dower
> First sprang him; for swift vultures to devour
> If he desists.

But his works express his soul, and in them Earth has her highest life. In return he draws his spiritual qualities from her:—

> He builds the soaring spires,
> That sing his soul in stone: of her he draws,
> Though blind to her, by spelling at her laws,
> Her purest fires.
>
> Through him hath she exchanged,
> For the gold harvest-robes, the mural crown,

Her haggard quarry-features and thick frown
Where monsters ranged.

And order, high discourse,
And decency, than which is life less dear,
She has of him: the lyre of language clear,
Love's tongue and source.

Earth withholds a mystery from man's knowledge, which 'inveterately he strains to see'—

And ever that old task
Of reading what he is and whence he came,
Whither to go, finds wilder letters flame
Across her mask.

The poet, who views the relations of Earth and man in all their various aspects, allows that her treatment of him does not always show a 'mother's care':—

Once worshipped Prime of Powers,
She still was the Implacable: as a beast,
She struck him down and dragged him from the feast
She crowned with flowers.

Her pomp of glorious hues,
Her revelries of ripeness, her kind smile,
Her songs, her peeping faces, lure awhile
With symbol-clues.

. . . . . .

He may entreat, aspire,
He may despair, and she has never heed.
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,
Not his desire.

This is surely no extravagant boast of Earth's goodness to man! And yet amid all his failures

and sick strugglings he has a spirit of Faith, in the light of which he may read Earth and see 'stern joy her origin.' This Faith is partly hope—of something, we know not what—'the hoped dawn-rose'; partly it is acceptance of the decree that good must survive not in ourselves but in our offspring and our work:—

> And her desires are those
> For happiness, for lastingness, for light.
> 'Tis she who kindles in his haunting night
> The hoped dawn-rose.
>
> Fair fountains of the dark
> Daily she waves him, that his inner dream
> May clasp amid the glooms a springing beam,
> A quivering lark:
>
> This life and her to know
> For Spirit: with awakenedness of glee
> To feel stern joy her origin: not he
> The child of woe.
> . . . . . .
> Then shall the horrid pall
> Be lifted, and a spirit nigh divine,
> 'Live in thy offspring as I live in mine,'
> Will hear her call.

Earth and Man inevitably reminds every lover of poetry of Mr. Swinburne's *Hertha*, in which the pantheistic Universal Goddess addresses her child man, in an unsurpassed fury of benediction, culminating in the final apostrophe—

> One birth of my bosom;
> One beam of mine eye;

One topmost blossom
That scales the sky;
Man, equal and one with me, man that is made of me, man that is I.

No two poems could be more different than these pieces are one from another, both in literary style and in the mood that dictated each. While Mr. Swinburne develops a single idea in the sustained magnificence of thirty stanzas, made one in spirit by the devouring passion for freedom, Mr. Meredith has almost as many thoughts as verses, and as many moods as thoughts. Mr. Swinburne's lyrical riot of rebellion against Jehovah, ending in the dethronement of the old God of theism in a scene wonderfully saved from being absurd by the glory of its poetical onrush, is revolutionary in spirit, perfectly confident in the sufficiency of man, and in his need for liberation alone. It is the *carmagnole* of religion.

A creed is a rod
And a crown is of night,
But this thing is God,
To be man with thy might,
To grow straight in the strength of thy spirit, and live out thy life as the light.

. . . . . .

I that saw where ye trod
The dim paths of the night
Set the shadow called God
In your skies to give light;
But the morning of manhood is risen, and the shadowless soul is in sight.

This is great; and the spirit of man, especially in England, often fails for want of an occasional draught from this upwelling spring. It breathes of 1848. Mr. Meredith's poem, on the other hand, is a song, not of revolution, but of evolution. It has none of the careless, glorious confidence of the barricades; the poet looks forward with 'stern joy' into the storm ahead, with critical eyes undimmed by rash hope or blind fear. He regards man with a chastened enthusiasm, and has hope in progress rather than in perfectibility. His interest in theology is mainly ethical, and it is for certain ethical reasons that he has sympathy with the liberationist.

So, too, in the face of the absolutely unsolved problem of life after death, Mr. Meredith is chiefly concerned with the ethical attitude of man towards the unknown. He has a moral repugnance to that common attitude towards life after death which is rendered into such admirable poetry in Browning's famous *Prospice*. The first part of that piece, describing grand valour in the face of death, so characteristic of the brave man who wrote it, prepares us for something other, I cannot help feeling, than these beautiful lines, on which the poem closes :—

In a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!

It might be said that this is scarcely religious. Even God is relegated to the background. Browning does himself injustice when he makes his valour in the face of death depend on the absolute certainty of the fulfilment of his heart's desire. There is something in it akin to the attitude which Mr. Meredith deprecates as unworthy, in his *Faith on Trial*:—

If we strain to the farther shore,
We are catching at comfort near.
These are our sensual dreams;
Of the yearning to touch, to feel
The dark Impalpable sure,
And have the Unveiled appear.

This he calls 'the cry of unfaith,'—not I think paradoxically. For if it is only on such fixed conditions, dictated by ourselves to satisfy our individual desires, that we will trust God, how can we be said to show Faith? But in fact the conditions are unknown. It is 'in the spirit,' ethically, not in knowledge, cosmologically, that true Faith resides. Faith is in the unknown, not in the

known: in the spiritual, not the palpable. So Mr. Meredith says that Earth

> The gloomy Wherefore of our battle-field
> Solves in the Spirit.[1]

Just as, in his treatment of every-day events, he thinks that 'life,' though imperfect, 'is worthy of the Muse'; so, in a higher plane of his philosophy, he thinks that man's place in the Universe is worthy to rouse enthusiasm, though it may not be all the heart desires. He objects on moral grounds to the cry for eternity of individual life and love as a claim established upon the Universe, which it must pay us under pain of our displeasure with the sum of things. Security for the continuance of good is a hope that 'touches purest'; and on that score, fortunately, Faith can bid us be of good cheer, since reason and observation are at least not against us. But the craving for the perpetuation of self and its treasures in their separate form, fails morally, because it does not recognise that we are parts of a whole. Our individual separateness is but a means of progress, not an end in itself. Each of us is

> the vessel of the Thought.
> The vessel splits, the Thought survives.
>
> Nought else are we when sailing brave,
> Save husks to raise and bid it burn.

[1] Sonnet, *Sense and Spirit.*

Glimpse of its livingness will wave
A light the senses can discern

Across the river of the death,
Their close.

It is thus that he faces death, with the 'rapture of the forward view' for humanity to cheer him :—

For love we Earth, then serve we all;
Her mystic secret then is ours:
We fall, or view our treasures fall,
Unclouded, as beholds her flowers

Earth, from a night of frosty wreck,
Enrobed in morning's mounted fire,
When lowly, with a broken neck,
The crocus lays her cheek to mire.[1]

The 'warriors of the sighting brain,' whose love and labour 'give worn humanity new youth,' find the path of progress in the law of life and death :—

Life was to them the bag of grain,
And Death the weedy harrow's tooth.[2]

Death clears the way for new growth, which would otherwise be cumbered up by the old, and find no room to grow. A perfect Universe might have a less wasteful law of development, but it would seem that such is the law in ours. The fallen fir-cones are the allegory of our dead ones, in their stillness beneath the glad life surging perpetually above them :—

[1] *Thrush in February.* [2] *Ibid.*

A wind sways the pines,
And below
Not a breath of wild air;
Still as the mosses that glow
On the flooring and over the lines
Of the roots here and there.
The pine-tree drops its dead;
They are quiet, as under the sea.
Overhead, overhead
Rushes life in a race,
As the clouds the clouds chase;
And we go,
And we drop like the fruits of the tree,
Even we,
Even so.[1]

Though Mr. Meredith has little sympathy with the cry for the perpetuation of the individual, he has faith in the perpetuation of good, nor is he certain that this is being achieved only in those ways which appear upon the surface of life. We know so little. He will leave that to his mother Earth:—

Earth your haven, Earth your helm,
You command a double realm:
Labouring here to pay your debt,
Till your little sun shall set;
Leaving her the future task:
Loving her too well to ask.[2]

In this mood of Agnosticism wedded to Faith, he accepts the stroke of death on those whom he loves. *A Faith on Trial* is a long poetical study of his

[1] *Dirge in Woods.* See also *Woodman and Echo.*
[2] *Woods of Westermain.*

feelings and philosophy when put to this ultimate test.

As to his own death, he says, with a fine suggestiveness that would shine brightly on a tombstone,—

> Into the breast that gives the rose,
> Shall I with shuddering fall?[1]

Amid all this confusion of doubt and hope, he is certain of one thing. Our work outlasts us:—

> Enough if we have winked to sun,
> Have sped the plough a season;
> There is a soul for labour done,
> Endureth fixed as reason.[2]

And here we have Mazzini's exhortation, the noblest known to man, thrown into Vittoria's song:—

> CAMILLA.
>
> Our life is but a little holding, lent
> To do a mighty labour: we are one
> With heaven and the stars when it is spent
> To serve God's aim: else die we with the sun.[3]

On this plane of feeling the question of personal immortality seems unworthy and insignificant, whatever the answer to it may be. The only personal survival of which we are certain, says Mr. Meredith, is survival in the memory of those who knew us, and whom we influenced and encouraged. We live in what we have made them

---

[1] *Spirit of Earth in Autumn*, p. 231 below.
[2] *The Question Whither.*
[3] *Vittoria*, chap. xxi.

to be, as also in our daily work left behind us done. Some also live on in their children; but there are more ways than one of begetting or of bearing life:—

> life begets with fair increase
> *Beyond the flesh*, if life be true.[1]

Now, as I hope, I have made clear the spirit of his attitude to the death of the good and the well-loved, and if I have been understood, this noble sonnet will need no comment here:—

TO A FRIEND LOST

When I remember, friend, whom lost I call,
Because a man beloved is taken hence,
The tender humour and the fire of sense
In your good eyes; how full of heart for all,
And chiefly for the weaker by the wall,
You bore that lamp of sane benevolence;
Then see I round you Death his shadows dense
Divide, and at your feet his emblems fall.
For surely are you one with the white host,
Spirits, whose memory is our vital air
Through the great love of Earth they had: lo, these,
Like beams that throw the path on tossing seas,
Can bid us feel we keep them in the ghost,
Partakers of a strife they joyed to share.

If, as some say, Mr. Meredith has exaggerated the importance of considering future generations,

[1] *Thrush in February.*

he has only filled up a void left by too many others. Provision for future ages ought to hold a larger place than it does as a theme in the religion and poetry of the West. It ought to be one of our highest ideals. But it has been left as the special province of dry utilitarians, the 'motive grinders' against whose excellence we all instinctively rebel; our duty to the future that we shall not see is associated in our minds with Mill rather than with Wordsworth, with Herbert Spencer rather than with Dante. This is not as it should be; and Mr. Meredith, in his capacity of poet and poetic novelist, has done what he could to apply a remedy. To save one's own soul was the aim of life as preached by old religion; it followed that to develop one's own soul has become the aim preached by modern culture. The old monastic ideal that disregarded the interest, or even the existence, of future generations, has its modern counterpart in the cult of self-development as a sufficient end in life; in the comparative rarity of public spirit and public service in a leisured class more numerous and more wealthy by far than in any previous age; in the continuance of conditions of life among the poor which mortgage the future of the race; and in a birth-rate that in some classes and races shows too rapid a decline.

The society for which its individual members feel no duty to provide after their death, will not

flourish. The life in which the sense of duty to others has been completely replaced by the doctrine of self-salvation or self-culture, will develop in queer directions. Mr. Meredith thinks that the irresponsible rich do not take as large a part as they should take in the various activities that regard the coming generations,—the rearing of families, social reform, artistic creation, the endowment of educational and other public institutions, and the ordinary economic production on which society rests.

All these things

> Keep the young generations in hail
> And bequeath them no tumbled house![1]

A reaction from mere self-culture to this ideal seems already observable in several different quarters. In a crude form, partly false and wholly unattractive because Mr. Shaw puts the means to stand for the end and despises the love of human beings for one another, it is the theory of the 'Superman.' Mr. Wells, with his saner views for mankind in the making, urges the individual to regard himself as the custodian of the precious gift of life. The idea is again abroad that life has its duties (to posterity), as well as its privileges. But the most poetical and the most

[1] *The Empty Purse.*

lovable exposition of this truth with all its numerous qualifications, is still found in Mr. Meredith's works.

The provision for a progressive future will become the fundamental idea of politics for all parties, now that our conception of the world is evolutionary; Burke's mediæval notion of an unchanging and static society on Earth, with Heaven and Hell beyond the grave to redress its injustice, no longer seriously appeals even to the conservative or to the religious world.

And so this lover of woods knows that 'dear Earth's design' is, at this stage of evolution, being wrought out amid the ugly sights and sounds of our great cities. The creator of Commander Beauchamp does not seek to attract his followers into rural solitude and leisured ease. When in a Surrey garden, February's thrush sings to him out of Winter's throat—

> The young time with the life ahead;

he knows that it is in London,

> The City of the smoky fray

that

> Our battle urges; there
> Spring heroes many: issuing thence,
> Names that should leave no vacant air
> For fresh delight in confidence.
>
> Our song and star are they to lead
> The tidal multitude and blind

From bestial to the higher breed
By fighting souls of love divined.

They scorned the ventral dream of peace,
Unknown in nature. This they knew:
That life begets with fair increase
Beyond the flesh, if life be true.[1]

He warns intellectual and æsthetic youth against 'that sly temptation of the illumined brain,' to keep itself out of touch with the mass of men :—

Who sweats not with the flock will seek in vain
To shed the words that are ripe fruit of sun.[2]

For be sure the bravest wing
Preens it in our common spring,
Thence along the vault to soar,
You with others, gathering more,
Glad of more, till you reject
Your proud title of elect.[3]

So the *Garden of Epicurus* is not for this rough world :—

That Garden of sedate Philosophy
Once flourished, fenced from passion and mishap,
A shining spot upon a shaggy map;
Where mind and body, in fair junction free,
Luted their joyful concord; like the tree
From root to flowering twigs a flowing sap.
Clear Wisdom found in tended Nature's lap,
Of gentlemen the happy nursery.

[1] *Thrush in February.*
[2] Sonnet, *The Discipline of Wisdom.*
[3] *Woods of Westermain.*

That Garden would on light supremest verge,
Were the long drawing of an equal breath
Healthful for Wisdom's head, her heart, her aims.
Our world which for its Babels wants a scourge,
And for its wilds a husbandman, acclaims
The crucifix that came of Nazareth.

And yet there are always two sides to Mr. Meredith's views on any question: it is not true to say, as some critics have done,[1] that 'the good of Meredith's optimism is exclusively others' good.' This is to ignore not the least characteristic half of his writings. It is clearly paradoxical to regard the author of *Love in the Valley*, and the *Hymn to Colour*, of Diana and Harry Richmond, as the man who denies all joy on Earth, all good in life save the somewhat melancholy satisfaction of helping the babe unborn. It is true that Mr. Meredith wages metaphorical war on the 'dragon of self'; but it is not war to the knife. He has a sympathetic acquaintance with the creature and his ways, and shows him a wise, fatherly tenderness, paring his claws, taming, civilising, and ennobling his qualities. But any attempt to kill him, Mr. Meredith considers an attempt at murder which is invariably unsuccessful:—

[1] Mr. Pigou, *Independent Review*, May 1905.

Oft has he been riven; slain
Is no force in Westermain.
Wait, and we shall forge him curbs,
Put his fangs to uses, tame.

Conversion must be change, not destruction, for there is a driving force in 'self' which ought not to be wasted. Thus a man is often saved from his worst by an appeal to his personal pride. And, in a higher stage, the grand change of ripening years comes when youth loses the Egoism but not the force of his primitive qualities, when he finds a 'larger self,' when his own happiness resides more and more in the happiness of others:—

You a larger self will find:
Sweetest fellowship ensues
With the creatures of your kind.

Of the old self, Mr. Meredith says:—

Him shall Change, transforming late,
Wonderously renovate.
Hug himself the creature may:
What he hugs is loathed decay.
. . . . . .
Change, the strongest son of Life,
Has the Spirit here to wife.

But the blood of the primitive animal should still beat high, under the restraints that tame it. The true wisdom

Tempered holds the young blood-heat,
Yet through measured grave accord,

Hears the heart of wildness beat
Like a centaur's hoof on sward.[1]

The attempt to get rid of self altogether involves asceticism, against which Mr. Meredith keeps an armed watch, more constant than that of any other moralist. 'Nature will force her way, and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she comes up, not the fairest part of her uppermost!'[2] His position has two fronts: against asceticism and complete self-sacrifice on the one hand, and against mere seeking for happiness and self-development on the other.

Mr. Meredith, both as poet and as novelist, is the prophet of the joy and beauty of Earth. But he does not, like Fra Angelico and Burne-Jones, seek beauty and joy by shutting out all ugly and painful realities from his studio. Like Zola, Ibsen, or Tolstoi, he goes down into the dark places; but he does not live there always, and he carries his lamp with him.

You must love the light so well,
That no darkness will seem fell:[3]

This a hard saying; but so are all the sayings that are really of use. In narrative and dramatic quality, his novels sometimes yield to those of other great masters, but the quality in which they invariably surpass, is the power to make the reader

[1] *Woods of Westermain.*
[2] *Diana*, chap. i.
[3] *Woods of Westermain.*

feel the poetry and beauty and joy of life, even in the most ordinary or in the most tragic moments. One would never deny value to the life of the dullest of his characters, or of the most unfortunate. When Richard Feverel is in the act of returning to take his part in the most heart-rending tragedy in modern fiction, he learns in the thunder-storm on the Rhenish hillside the full meaning and joy of the Earth he treads, and of the life he is about to fling wantonly to ruin. We feel, as we read Mr. Meredith's best novels, that if life is without interest or joy to us, it must be because we ourselves are dull or cowardly. Yet, for many people, in the circumstances in which they live, it is no easy task to be rid of *ennui* and of fear. But they find help in exhortation inspired by genius, and in the lively portraiture of great examples coloured with all the glow of poetry. Such are the means by which, under a thousand different forms, religion, history, art, and literature come to the rescue of mankind. In neglecting to fulfil this function, much of the best modern writing goes astray. It has not the joy of life and the recognition of nobleness in men and women, which colour everything written by Mr. Meredith. His works are a medicine for our poor, nervous, melancholic modern world, so pitilessly stretched on the rack by its other intellectual giants.

Life is always good and bad, though the two

ingredients are mixed in very different proportions for different people. But each man has the choice whether to fix the eyes of his soul on the good part or on the bad. The choice is 'in yourself.' Fair are the magic forests of life, but

> In yourself may lurk the trap :

and if you take life wrongly, the whole fantastical curse is let loose on you :—

> Beauty, of her tresses shorn,
> Shrieks as nature's maniac :
> Hideousness on hoof and horn
> Tumbles, yapping in her track :
> Haggard Wisdom, stately once,
> Leers fantastical and trips :
> Allegory drums the sconce,
> Impiousness nibblenips.

The safety of the soul depends on its own courage:

> Enter these enchanted woods,
> You who dare.[1]

Mr. Meredith's advice is to examine evil closely enough to learn its nature and its remedies; but, for the rest, to say, like Nature in the woods—

> I raise my head to aspects fair,
> From foul I turn away.[2]

We should study to find out evil in order to detect and fight it, and not, as so many think, in order to contemplate it. But we should study to find out

[1] *Wooas of Westermain.* [2] *Woodland Peace.*

good, in order to fill our thoughts therewith. It is the food of the spirit; but it always needs to be sought for, and sometimes even the appetite for it needs cultivation. If every one took half as much trouble to find out and enjoy the good, as modern pessimists take to dig up and gloat over the bad, we should be a happier and better race.

The best cure for pessimism, as also for the optimism that denies facts, is laughter, Mr. Meredith would have us think. 'If the Comic idea prevailed with us . . . the vapours of unreason and sentimentalism would be blown away before they were productive. Where would Pessimist and Optimist be? They would in any case have a diminished audience.'

'There are questions, as well as persons, that only the Comic can fitly touch.'[1] Byron's spiritual indigestion does not need to be rebuked with a serious face:—

> Considerably was the world
> Of spinsterdom and clergy racked
> While he his hinted horrors hurled,
> And she pictorially attacked.
> A duel hugeous.

The creator of Vernon Whitford wonders that his Lordship's *Manfred* could have climbed the Alps,

[1] *Essay on Comedy*, p. 68-69.

'shedding rascal sweat,' without feeling better for the exercise by the time he reached the top :—

> Projected from the bilious Childe,
> This clatterjaw his foot could set
> On Alps, without a breast beguiled
> To glow in shedding rascal sweat.[1]

So too, there was the unfortunate Greek philosopher Empedocles, who, unless he has been slandered by poetical tradition, dived down the crater of Aetna in a fit of disgust with the world of men. Mr. Meredith thus hymns that famous leap :—

> He leaped. With none to hinder,
> Of Aetna's fiery scoriae
> In the next vomit-shower, made he
> A more peculiar cinder.
> And this great Doctor, can it be,
> He left no saner recipe
> For men at issue with despair?
> Admiring, even his poet owns,
> While noting his fine lyric tones,
> The last of him was heels in air![2]

The Spirit of Shakespeare, according to Mr. Meredith, showed us the way out of pessimism by

> Thunders of laughter, clearing air and heart.

Faith, then, consists in two parts. First in the 'acceptance' of the rough, cruel methods of evolution, the 'sacrifice' to which Nature 'prompts her

[1] *Manfred.* [2] *Empedocles.*

best,' or which she imposes on men when 'she reaps them as the sower reaps.' This must be accepted, not because it is good, but because it is unalterable. The second part of this Faith lies in the cultivation of the power of joy, the duty not to let the good escape us while we sit mourning over the evil. The two parts of this ideal hang together. Joy strengthens us to accept evil; and the frank acceptance of evil alone sets the mind free to realise joy. Such is the Faith shadowed forth allegorically in the *Day of the Daughter of Hades*.[1] Skiageneia has one day above ground, one short day of life. But she does not spend it in complaining because it is not longer. She spends it in satisfying her thirst for sun and earth, even though she must soon leave them.

> She rose, yet not moved by affright;
> 'Twas rather good haste to use
> Her holiday of delight
> In the beams of the God of the Muse.

And when at last the black chariot is upon her:—

> So stood she awhile
> In the gloom of the terror afield,
> And the silence about her smile
> Said more than of tongue is revealed.
> I have breathed: I have gazed: I have been:
> It said: and not joylessly shone
> The remembrance of light through the screen
> Of a face that seemed shadow and stone.

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[1] For the narrative of that poem, see pp. 97-103 above.

There is not individual justice for all; to some life is hardly worth living, if they can take no pride in themselves as servants of God, or as instruments for the preservation of society and the race. But, on the whole and to most people, life is worth living, and it will become so in ever higher degree and to increasing numbers, if morality and care for the coming generations prevail.

But if there is just cause of complaint, is there not also just cause of rejoicing? Why should we take the good for granted, and only remark on the evil? Some people seem to be—consciously or unconsciously—under the domination of two false ideals, which combine to make life seem to them a barren thing. The first fallacy is, that life has no value except from the point of view of self—the old, smaller self; the second, that it is as good to meditate on the ills of life as to rejoice over its joys. Mr. Meredith thinks otherwise. He urges us to feel that we are parts of a whole; that the value of life depends on our serviceableness to comrades and successors, no less than on our own welfare. To be used as a stepping-stone is, perhaps, a form of honour too passive to have much attraction; but we must make the honour of service an active virtue, and say that to hand on the torch, and to brighten the flame as we run with it, is no unworthy aim. As we run that course, we grow more heartily alive; and our whole being,

that is compounded of blood, brain, and spirit, is in fit condition to rejoice, and itself to taste

> Pleasures that through blood run sane,
> Quickening spirit from the brain.[1]

The essence of a religion is not a creed, but an attitude to life; and Mr. Meredith's attitude to life is a right one. A wary but a cheerful and kindly Odysseus, he steers us, 'compact of what we are, between the ascetic rocks and the sensual whirlpools';[2] he can listen unbound to every song of the Sirens, enraptured, but resolute by the rudder; and the one-eyed Polyphemus of Despair is left cheated and shouting after the white track of his departing vessel.

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[1] *Woods of Westermain.*

[2] *Diana*, chap. xxxvii.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRITIC OF SOCIETY

ALTHOUGH I have now made some attempt to render the spirit of Mr. Meredith's philosophy, or, as it might more properly be called, his attitude to the universe, I have done little to indicate his method of applying his principles to practice. Yet perhaps the most valuable part of his philosophy resides in his ethical judgments, his direct comments on life itself. These cannot, indeed, be thoroughly understood except in relation to his attitude towards the universe, which finds expression chiefly in his poetry. But his novels contain the application of his ideas to life and conduct: it pervades every part of their structure, even in chapters where the reader seems for the time carried away on a wave of mere sensation. Every person and every incident that is put on the board, is introduced partly for its own sake, but partly in order to help the reader in the complicated and difficult task of seeing the whole truth of the ethical

problems of the book. And these are his main interest.

I have said that there are always two fronts to Mr. Meredith's position. His moral judgments combine a high severity with breadth of outlook and depth of sympathy. It is because his condemnations are not made by the mere application of formal rules, that they are so conclusive and so damning. It is because he is so sympathetic that he so completely exposes the faults of his characters, and not least of his favourites. The real motives are left in no doubt, no obscurity, behind which the actors can take refuge from censure; for every corner is explored by the friendly and imaginative analysis. Beauchamp and his various Tory antagonists, Alvan and his lady, Diana and her lovers, are each presented to us with equal reality and justice. The result is not to make them all level in our esteem; on the contrary, we are so placed that we can really choose and judge. It is the terrible sympathy which the author compels us to feel with the detested Egoist, which renders that all too familiar image of our baser self a nightmare to haunt and warn us out of the sentimentalist's paradise and the tyrant's castle.

From the point of view of the moralist, fiction has this great advantage over the observation of real life, that in fiction we can see men and women as they truly are, and not merely as they appear to

themselves or to others. It enlarges our experience by teaching us to see common events in their most important, but not their most evident aspect, that is, to see them moulding the character and inmost being of each of the men and women concerned. Such experience helps the readers of really great works of fiction, to discover in themselves those 'Alpine heights in the mind to mount for a look out over their own and the world's pedestrian tracks.'[1] And fiction has this further advantage, that it shows us actions in the light of their final results. In those two respects, fiction can be made more instructive than daily life. So too, from the ethical point of view, history has one superiority over contemporary politics, that it can show us the ultimate sequel to actions; but it does not possess the other and greater superiority of fiction—it cannot discover the real instead of the apparent motives of the actors. Of the advantages which fiction as an ethical weapon possesses over daily life and over history, Mr. Meredith has made the utmost possible use.

Mr. Meredith's poems, I have said, are more especially concerned with his philosophy, and the novels with his application of it to ethical problems. Yet, just as in the novels we often come across statements of his philosophy, so we find poems

[1] *One of Our Conquerors*, chap. vii.

dealing expressly with some of the larger issues of social and personal relations. It is to these that I wish now to draw the attention of the reader.

In *Love in the Valley* and elsewhere Mr. Meredith is the poet of love; but in some of his later poems we have to consider him rather as the poetical philosopher touching on that first of themes. His philosophy of love, and his attitude towards the various ethical problems depending on it, are connected with his evolutionary doctrine of the relation of flesh and spirit. Asceticism and sensualism, the two antagonists of love, are based theoretically on a supposed impassable division between sense and spirit, between natural and divine. Asceticism, of which Tolstoi is in our own day the revered prophet, is a heavenly and hellish doctrine. Mr. Meredith prefers temperance, the earthly. For, in accordance with his belief that we are evolved body and soul out of Earth, he does not regard our flesh as wholly vile. It is the 'good gross earth' in which the soul has its roots, out of which it rears its flower-head. Pull up the roots, and the flower soon withers. The experiment has often been made. The morality of priest-led societies is still based upon it. Where the convent is the ideal, the *mariage de convenance* and the *cavaliere servente* are the common practice. The

English have known better than that, and in this respect their society is more free and more in accordance with common sense, as the narrator of Renée's tragedy must perforce admit. Yet even in England, he would have us see, there are many who still misconceive their idea of woman, thinking of her as a 'rose-pink' saint from another world, whose divinest quality is that ignorance of all practical affairs which forbids her to understand or to criticise her master; she is worshipped as a statue, but may not descend from the pedestal. This conventional stultification of woman in alleged pursuance of an ideal was more general when Mr. Meredith began to write than it is to-day. In a famous passage in *Diana* he asserts the nobility, the religious character of fiction, whenever it displays men and women as they really are, neither the 'rose-pink' of so-called 'idealist,' nor the 'dirty-drab' of the so-called 'realist':—

'Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab; and that instead of everlastingly shifting those barren aspects, the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight. . . . And imagine the celestial refreshment of having a pure decency in the place of sham; real flesh; a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending. Honourable will fiction then appear; honourable, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood. . . . Worse than that alternative dirty drab, your recurring rose-pink

is rebuked by hideous revelations of the filthy foul; for nature will force her way, and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she comes up, not the fairest part of her uppermost! Peruse your Realists—really your castigators for not having yet embraced Philosophy. As she grows in the flesh when discreetly tended, nature is unimpeachable, flower-like, yet not too decoratively a flower; you must have her with the stem, the thorns, the roots, and the fat bedding of roses.'[1]

So love itself is rooted in Earth, and only when so rooted can it flower to Heaven:—

'Now Redworth believed in the soul of Diana. With her, or rather with his thought of her soul, he understood the right union of women and men, from the roots to the flowering heights of that rare graft. She gave him comprehension of the meaning of love; a word in many mouths, not often explained. With her, wound in his idea of her, he perceived it to signify a new start in our existence, a finer shoot of the tree stoutly planted in good gross earth; the senses running their live sap, and the minds companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction. In sooth, a happy prospect for the sons and daughters of Earth, divinely indicating more than happiness: the speeding of us, compact of what we are, between the ascetic rooks and the sensual whirlpools, to the creation of certain nobler races, now very dimly imagined.'[2]

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[1] *Diana*, chap. i.

[2] *Ibid.*, chap. xxxvii.

In his analysis of 'what we are' he sees in each of us a Triad—'blood, brain, and spirit.' Such is the order of the three in historical evolution :—

> Each of each in sequent birth,
> Blood and brain and spirit.'[1]

This triple division of the human personality appears throughout all Mr. Meredith's works; though sometimes with a slight variation of the names. The 'blood,' which sometimes he calls the 'body,' sometimes the 'senses,' is animal vigour. It is the driving force; but 'mind' ('brain') should be the leader. Woe to the man whose

> —senses still
> Usurp the station of their issue, mind.[2]

For brain is superior to the body, marking a later stage of evolution out of the primitive slime of our Mother Earth.

> Nor broken for us shows the mould
> When muscle is in mind renewed :
> Though farther from her nature rude,
> Yet nearer to her spirit's hold.[3]

Body can exist without brain, and both brain and body without 'spirit,' for they came first. But the 'spirit' or 'soul,' coming last in order of evolution,

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[1] *Woods of Westermain.* [2] *Earth and Man.*
[3] *Hard Weather.*

cannot exist without the other two. Indeed, in one sense it consists in their mutual interaction. The soul is the flushing of the brain by the blood, of the cold intellectual by the hot animal. On the spiritual plane, it is passion guided by reason, thought ennobled by emotion. To Mr. Meredith the soul is a spiritual reality, but it is not something preternatural breathed into our clay from above. The soul is to him the flower of evolution. It is autochthonous, sprung of Earth. It is reached only through the senses and the intellect. Brain is

> The station for the flight of soul.[1]

And the soul is not a mere rapture of feeling, into which we retire to escape the world. It must be 'a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending.'[2]

Now many of the problems of life and conduct consist in the proper union and management of these three constituent parts of us—the body, the mind, and the soul. Clearly this is the case in the choice of our pleasures, where most of us have more choice than in our work. Not only love, the highest pleasure, but all 'Earth's nourishing delights' appeal to the body, and should also appeal to the brain and spirit. Of such pleasures there are many kinds. Here is one, described by

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[1] *Hard Weather.*

[2] *Diana*, chap. i.

Mr. Meredith's friend Leslie Stephen, *In Praise of Walking*:—[1]

'When you have made an early start, followed the coastguard track on the slopes above the cliffs, struggled through the gold and purple carpeting of gorse and heather on the moors, dipped down into quaint little coves, with a primitive fishing village, followed the blinding whiteness of the sands round a lonely bay, and at last emerged upon a headland where you can settle into a nook of the rocks, look down upon the glorious blue of the Atlantic waves breaking into foam on the granite, and see the distant sea-levels glimmering away till they blend imperceptibly into cloudland; then you can consume your modest sandwiches, light your pipe, and feel more virtuous, and thoroughly at peace with the universe, than it is easy even to conceive yourself elsewhere. I have fancied myself on such occasions to be a felicitous blend of poet and saint.'

So the walk and the sandwiches and pipe all play their part in the production of the sensations of poet and saint. That is the great discovery made since the Middle Ages. You cannot divide soul from body; both must have food and exercise. It is pleasures such as Leslie Stephen here describes, the pleasures of Artemis, and also the pleasures

[1] *Monthly Review*, August 1901, p. 110.

of Aphrodite in her place and season, of which Mr. Meredith writes :—

> Then for you are pleasures pure,
> Sureties as the stars are sure :
> Not the wanton beckoning flags
> Which, of flattery and delight,
> Wax to the grim Habit-Hags
> Riding souls of men to night :
> Pleasures that through blood run sane
> Quickening spirit from the brain.[1]

The spirit (the soul) is quickened through the brain by the impulse coming from the blood. Such pleasures should be sought, when to seek them is not a theft or a cruelty. They nourish strength and health for work, and they are good in themselves. Of *A Certain People* Mr. Meredith says—

> They need their pious exercises less
> Than schooling in the Pleasures : fair belief
> That these are devilish only to their thief.

The thief is he who steals an undue share of pleasure, or takes it at the expense of others, or by a breach of some necessary social law.

In the latest book of poems, *The Reading of Life*, published in 1901, there is a group of four poems called *A Reading of Life*, on the subject of Artemis and Aphrodite. *The Huntress* is Artemis, the symbol of our development of body, brain and

[1] *Woods of Westermain.*

spirit in purity, in strife with the elements—the strenuous and the open-air pleasures. *The Persuader* is Aphrodite. *The Test of Manhood* consists in giving each goddess her due, and no more. In the introductory poem, called *The Vital Choice*, each of the rivals claims 'worship undivided':—

> Or shall we run with Artemis
> Or yield the breast to Aphrodite?
> Both are mighty;
> Both give bliss;
> Each can torture if derided;
> Each claims worship undivided.
> . . . . .
> Youth must offer on bent knees
> Homage unto one or other;
> Earth, the mother,
> This decrees.

And it is Death to 'shun or too devoutly follow' either the Huntress or the Persuader. Viewing these two, the poet says of man that it is

> His task to hold them both in breast, and yield
> Their dues to each, and of their war be field.

Such is *The Test of Manhood*. The Huntress and the Persuader are his 'tempters,' in that each claims the whole, when each has only a right to a part:—

> Earth's nourishing delights, no more gainsaid,
> He tastes, as doth the bridegroom rich in youth.
> Then knows he Love, that beckons and controls;
> The star of sky upon his footway cast;

> Then match in him who holds his tempters fast,
> The body's love and mind's, whereof the soul's.
> Then Earth her man for woman finds at last,
> To speed the pair unto her goal of goals.[1]

So Aphrodite rather than Artemis seems to be the 'goal of goals,' but only when her rival has her dues, and only when she herself has passed through the process of evolution, from blood through brain, to soul :—

> The body's love and mind's, whereof the soul's.

In love, even more than in other human undertakings, it is disastrous to separate blood, brain, and spirit. See that you love with all three, says the poet, lest the object of your love prove to have been ill-chosen, and disaster follow :—

> Each of each in sequent birth,
> Blood and brain and spirit, three
> (Say the deepest gnomes of Earth)
> Join for true felicity.
> Are they parted, then expect
> Some one sailing will be wrecked :
> Separate hunting are they sped,
> Scan the morsel coveted.
> Earth that Triad is : she hides
> Joy from him who that divides ;
> Showers it when the three are one,
> Glassing her in union.[2]

'The senses running their live sap, and the minds

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[1] *Reading of Life*, p. 41 : *The Test of Manhood.*
[2] *Woods of Westermain*

companioned, and the spirits made one by the whole-natured conjunction': that is the only perfect love. Those who do not wish women to be educated, or to understand the interests of men, impede the mind's love; ascetics deny us the body's love; sensualists the soul's. But when all these are joined in one, then

> . . Beauty, like her star, descends the sky;
> Earth's answer, heaven's consent unto man's cry,
> Uplifted by the innumerable hosts.[1]

And so too, outside the region of love, it is fatal to neglect either blood, or brain, or soul. If we part company with any one of these three we shall be wrecked. The attempt to develop soul without blood, or worse still, without brain, is to court certain disaster, of which the chronicles of religion are full. The athletic craze for training the blood alone, is no better; and if the brain of the mere intellectual be a higher development, it is not in itself perfect, or satisfying, or secure.

It is a favourite theme of Mr. Meredith the novelist, that true love must be based on equal rights; that woman must be a free agent; that she must be allowed to have a mind, and that without

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[1] *Reading of Life*, p. 26: *The Persuader*.

a mind she cannot have a soul for perfect love. Clara Middleton and Diana of the Crossways were protagonists in that struggle. Those champions of the emancipation of women as conceived by Mr. Meredith, were not dowdies; and though Diana was justly proud during a short part of her career to work for her living, neither she nor Clara discarded any of the qualities of their sex. On the contrary, Mr. Meredith regards 'beauty' as the weapon of deliverance, meaning thereby not formal beauty alone, but all the manifold and subtle attractions which enable women to command a price and so to make terms with men.

In the *Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt* he throws this idea into poetical form. This fine poem is a singular masterpiece of ingenious art, by which a subject often regarded from its associations as prosaic, and at times as vulgarly comic, is argued out point by point, and yet is always kept on a high level of poetic beauty. It takes the form of a dialogue between the *Fair Ladies in Revolt* on the one hand, and a male champion of the old order on the other. The conservative spokesman has brought with him a 'friend,' who never speaks, but is throughout regarded as umpire of the debate. The ladies make their appeal to this friend—not by logic alone, it is hinted. Finally, in the forty-first stanza, he gives judgment for the rebels, and is carried off by them in humorous triumph.

In the first verse the two gentlemen arrive on a fair scene, and find the ladies awaiting them under the boughs of a tree :—

> See the sweet women, friend, that lean beneath
> The ever-falling fountain of green leaves
> Round the white bending stem, and like a wreath
> Of our most blushful flower shine trembling through,
> To teach philosophers the thirst of thieves :
> Is one for me? is one for you?

The new-comers are told the conditions :—

> 'Fair sirs, we give you welcome, yield you place,
> And you shall choose among us which you will,
> Without the idle pastime of the chase,
> If to this treaty you can well agree :
> To wed our cause, and its high task fulfil.
> He who's for us, for him are we!'

The last line is the burden of the poem.

But the conservative case is not lost for want of good pleading or of sound sense. The real dangers of the revolt, whenever it is conducted on wrong principles, are well set out :—

> 'Lady, there is a truth of settled laws
> That down the past burns like a great watch-fire.
> Let youth hail changeful mornings ; but your cause,
> Whetting its edge to cut the race in two,
> Is felony : you forfeit the bright lyre,
> Much honour and much glory you!
> . . . . . .
> So push you out of harbour in small craft,
> With little seamanship ; and comes a gale,
> The world will laugh, the world has often laughed,

Lady, to see how bold when skies are blue,
When black winds churn the deeps how panic-pale,
How swift to the old nest fly you!'

But the ladies have their answer:—if we are still weak, it is because we were shaped in slavery. Man too grows slavish and weak under tyranny of brute force, and his only escape is 'force of brain.' We women also claim that deliverance by 'brain.' On these grounds they appeal to the friend:—

'What thinks your friend, kind sir? We have escaped
But partly that old half-tamed wild beast's paw
Whereunder woman, the weak thing, was shaped:
Men too have known the cramping enemy
In grim brute force, whom force of brain shall awe:
Him our deliverer, await we!'

In one notable passage, the ladies have far the best of it: they are asked—

'But say, what seek you, madam? 'Tis enough
That you should have dominion o'er the springs
Domestic and man's heart: those ways, how rough,
How vile, outside the stately avenue
Where you walk sheltered by your angel's wings,
Are happily unknown to you.'

The answer is sufficiently crushing:—

'We hear women's shrieks on them. We like your phrase,
Dominion domestic! And that roar,
"What seek you?" is of tyrants in all days.
Sir, get you something of our purity,
And we will of your strength: we ask no more.
That is the sum of what seek we.'

The ladies are always appealing to the Court, like clever advocates; and they win the case. When at last judgment is given in their favour by the silent friend, the defeated pleader cries out:—

> 'Do I hear him? Oh, he is bewitched, bewitched!
> Heed him not! Traitress beauties you!'

and tells them

> 'Of weakness, and wise men, you hold the key.'

They do not deny it, but reply:—

> 'Then are there fresher mornings mounting East
> Than ever yet have dawned, sing we!'

When the dialogue is over, Mr. Meredith himself sums up in the last four verses:—

> Have women nursed some dream since Helen sailed
> Over the sea of blood the blushing star,
> That beauty, whom frail man as Goddess hailed,
> When not possessing her (for such is he!),
> Might in a wondering season seen afar,
> Be tamed to say not 'I,' but 'we'?

That is—can Beauty learn that her cause is the common cause of women, not the little cause of individual Helens? Can she learn to say—not 'I Helen,'—but 'we women'?

> Shall they make of Beauty their estate,
> The fortress and the weapon of their sex?

Let us hope so. Thus the poem ends, on the

enraptured masculine retrospect of the scene, half sigh, half laughter :—

> Yet ah ! to hear anew those ladies cry,
> 'He who's for us, for him are we !'

It is natural that Mr. Meredith should see a causal connection between the proper position of women and his favourite 'Comic Spirit'; the latter may be defined as the sane and thankful, but critically humorous, outlook on life commended to the world in his novels, as in all other true comedies. This Comic Spirit, with its tutelary watch over men and women, is represented in all his works, but the philosophy of it is most clearly expounded in his *Essay on Comedy*. There he suggests the relation which comedy, as he defines it, bears to the position of women as he would have it.

'Comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. The higher the Comedy, the more prominent the part they enjoy in it. . . . The heroines of Comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted: they seem so to the sentimentally-reared only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. Comedy is an exhibition of their battle with men,

and that of men with them: and as the two, however divergent, both look on one object, namely, Life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance. The Comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker; just as the philosopher discerns the similarity of boy and girl, until the girl is marched away to the nursery. Philosopher and Comic poet are of a cousinship in the eye they cast on life: and they are equally unpopular with our wilful English of the hazy region and the ideal that is not to be disturbed.'

Countries where women have no freedom and no equal part in society have no comedy in the true sense of the word:—

'Eastward you have total silence of Comedy among a people intensely susceptible to laughter, as the *Arabian Nights* will testify. Where the veil is over women's faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst. Arabs in this respect are worse than Italians—much worse than Germans;[1] just in the degree that their system of treating women is worse. . . .

[1] But 'the poor voice allowed to women in German domestic life will account for the absence of comic dialogues reflecting upon life in that land.'

'There has been fun in Bagdad. But there never will be civilisation where Comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes. I am not quoting the Arab to exhort and disturb the somnolent East; rather for cultivated women to recognise that the Comic Muse is one of their best friends. They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that where they have no social freedom, Comedy is absent: where they are household drudges, the form of Comedy is primitive: where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them. . . . But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty—in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilisation—there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.'

This Comic Spirit, which often comes to the rescue of the oppressed, whether man or woman, as effectively as the deliverer armed with eloquent thunders, is a holy thing; it is not banished as profane even from the most sacred relations of life. Love welcomes it as his counsellor:—

'You may estimate your capacity for Comic per-

ception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes.'

To understand Mr. Meredith's philosophy in full, it is necessary to sympathise with his Comic Spirit. It is an important part of his reading of Earth. It is not, as he is careful to point out in the *Essay on Comedy*, the same as irony, or satire; and it is totally opposed to cynicism.

'Popular writers, conscious of fatigue in creativeness, desire to be cogent in a modish cynicism; perversions of the idea of life, and of the proper esteem for the society we have wrested from brutishness, and would carry higher. . . . Comedy justly treated, as you find it in Molière . . . throws no infamous reflection upon life. It is deeply conceived, in the first place, and therefore it cannot be impure.'

This Spirit believes in progress and evolution, but it knows the limits to the possible pace of advance. Those who would have the world stand still, and those who would have us fly through the air to Utopia, are both victims of its gentle shafts. Mr. Meredith is, as we have seen, a reformer in theology, and in his pleadings for the equality of women; on many political and social questions

he might be called a radical; yet nothing is more characteristic of his view of life than his saying 'our civilisation is founded in common sense, and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it.' This cuts him off as a thinker from Tolstoi and from Edward Carpenter, whose only hopes are in a totally new society; most of all from Mr. Bernard Shaw, who seems to think that reformers and Philistines are all mad together. Mr. Meredith says of 'the Comic poet'—and the words can be applied to himself,—

'He is not concerned with beginnings or endings or surroundings, but with what you are now weaving. To understand his work and value it, you must have a sober liking of your kind and a sober estimate of our civilised qualities.'

On a society thus accepted with qualified approval, the Comic Spirit is to extend its beneficent and reforming influence:—

'If you believe that our civilisation is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the

corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.'

This intellectual spirit of humorous social sanity is not quite the same thing as mere hearty laughter. At least, that is only one element in the

Comic Spirit. But the most primitive laughter has its place in Mr. Meredith's reading of Earth. It cures the spiritually sick :—

> The torrential laugh of dam and sire
> Full of the marrowy race,

is often a short cut to reasonable views. In the *Appeasement of Demeter*, it is laughter that reconciles the bereaved goddess to life and Earth :—

> Laughter ! O thou reviver of sick Earth !
> Good for the spirit, good
> For body, thou ! to both art wine and bread !

A poem to which there is no close parallel in literature, not even among Mr. Meredith's own poems, is *The Sage Enamoured and the Honest Lady*. It is, in subject-matter, most like to his novels, for it is an intricate piece of psychology with a full discussion of the ethical questions raised. Much of the writing is obscure, but to study it is a spiritual education. It takes the reader, in thought and in feeling, to the very heart of the personal relations of two human beings. The subtlety is great, but Mr. Meredith employs it to reach the whole truth about the main issues —and not, as some moderns use great powers of subtlety, only to lead off on side tracks, into a world of thin feelings and trivial thoughts.

Rugged in too many places, the poem yet contains several passages of rare beauty.

The 'Sage enamoured' has reached the threshold of that age which feels itself divided from youth and love. But when he meets the lady of this poem—

> His youth uprising called his age the Past.

He feels that she has stolen his heart, and looking on her beauty, he is puzzled by 'the wherefore' of her unmarried state. It seems possible that she hides some secret.

> One fairest of the ripe unwedded left
> Her shadow on the Sage's path; he found,
> By common signs, that she had done a theft.
> He could have made the sovereign heights resound
> With questions of the wherefore of her state:
> He on far other but an hour before
> Intent. And was it man, or was it mate,
> That she disdained? or was there haply more?

There follows such a description of a woman as no poet but this one could have written:—

> About her mouth a placid humour slipped
> The dimple, as you see smooth lakes at eve
> Spread melting rings where late a swallow dipped.
> The surface was attentive to receive,
> The secret underneath enfolded fast.
> She had the step of the unconquered, brave,
> Not arrogant; and if the vessel's mast
> Waved liberty, no challenge did it wave.
> Her eyes were the sweet world desired of souls
> With something of a wavering line unspelt.

They held the look whose tenderness condoles
For what the sister in the look has dealt
Of fatal beyond healing; and her tones
A woman's honeyed amorous outvied,
As when in a dropped viol the wood-throb moans
Among the sobbing strings, that plain and chide
Like infants for themselves, less deep to thrill
Than those rich mother-notes for them breathed round.[1]
Those voices are not magic of the will
To strike love's wound, but of love's wound give sound,
Conveying it; the yearnings, pains and dreams.

This lady finds that she is loved by the Sage, and thinking it right to cure him, makes a confession of what once befell her. The great body of the poem discusses the issues raised by that confession, and pleads for equal laws of punishment for man and woman. It exposes man's tyranny—

The great Irrational, who thunders power,

claiming all license for the male, assigning no punishment to him, but allowing no term to be put to the punishment of his victims. The poet's conclusion is not that all punishment is wrong :—

The hoofed half-angel in the Puritan

[1] The metaphor compares this lady's voice to the sound which the woodwork of the viol gives out, when it is dropped upon the floor: other voices may sound sweet as the strings, but hers was like the more deeply thrilling 'rich mother notes' of the very 'wood-throb.' There are such voices, and those who have heard remember them.

nearly reads Nature rightly, he says, when his severity is not a mere cloak for 'brutish wrath.' But those who understand Nature read her behest to man and woman—

> Share your guilt
> In common.

And punishment does not achieve its purifying purposes if it never comes to an end. The theme is that developed in *Rhoda Fleming* and in *One of Our Conquerors*:—'Help poor girls.'

The Sage listens to the confession in silence—an awful silence for her, driving her to speak yet more things merely to break it:—

> Slave is the open mouth beneath the closed.
> . . . . . .
> A press of hideous impulse urged to speak:
> A novel dread of man enchained her dumb.
> She felt the silence thicken, heard it shriek,
> Heard Life subsiding on the eternal hum.
> . . . .
> The Lady said as much as breath will bear;
> To happier sisters inconceivable:
> Contemptible to veterans of the fair.
> . . . . . .
> Was the curtain's rent
> Too wide? he but a man of that herd male?
> She saw him as that herd of the forked head
> Butting the woman harrowed on her knees,
> Clothed only in life's last devouring red.

At last he speaks, and at good length, opening new horizons to her:—

> He passed her through the sermon's dull defile.
> Down under billowy vapour-gorges heaved
> The city and the vale and mountain-pile.
> She felt strange push of shuttle-threads that weaved.

These four lines are an example of the various peculiarities in Mr. Meredith's use of metaphor.[1] The first line half-humorously compares her patience under the Sage's preaching to the patience of an army being passed through a wearisome defile in the hills. But this image suggests to the poet a totally different metaphor for the second and third lines—where he calls to mind the view obtained at the summit of the pass, the dim new world suddenly raised to sight, new mountains, the valley and city, seen in glimpses through the billows and gorges of the mist below: even so were new vistas of life presented to her spiritual vision by the Sage's sermon. In the fourth line we have a new metaphor altogether (as he talked on, she felt new ideas beginning to push out in her mind and weave themselves into something substantial), while in the first line of the next verse we return for a moment to the figure of the mountain view:—

> A new land in an old beneath her lay;
> And forth to meet it did her spirit rush,
> As bride who without shame has come to say,
> Husband, in his dear face that caused her blush.

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[1] See pp. 9-14, above.

A natural woman's heart, not more than clad
By station and bright raiment, gathers heat
From nakedness in trusted hands: she had
The joy of those who feel the world's heart beat,
After long doubt of it as fire or ice;
Because one man had helped her to breathe free;
Surprised to faith in something of a price
Past the old charity in chivalry:—
Our first wild step to right the loaded scales
Displaying women shamefully outweighed.
The wisdom of humaneness best avails
For serving justice till that fraud is brayed.

And so, at the end of the poem, the wisdom of his middle age is well married to her youth:—

For him, the cynic in the Sage had play
A hazy moment, by a breath dispersed;
To think, of all alive most wedded they,
Whom time disjoined! He needed her quick thirst
For renovated earth: on earth she gazed,
With humble aim to foot beside the wise.
Lo, where the eyelashes of night are raised
Yet lowly over morning's pure grey eyes.

Although Mr. Meredith, unlike some other prophets of our day, holds that it is 'the first condition of sanity to believe that our civilisation is founded in common sense,' his philosophy and his temperament both lead him to make his criticism of society progressive rather than conservative. In social and political matters, as in everything else, he idealises practical reform. Man's evolution, as he understands it, has ceased

in these latter days to be an unconscious process of vegetable or animal growth; it is even ceasing to be a brute struggle between enemies for survival; nature's method of evolution for us now, is that we should actively use our brains to direct organised effort towards ends chosen for the good of all. Society, no less than the individual, must have 'an aim before the head.' And its aim and method must be as far as possible democratic.

May brain democratic be king of the host![1]

As a step towards the growth of the right spirit, Mr. Meredith would have men look at their country bravely, and see its plague-spots. The want of active brain, the small respect in which intellect is held by us in England, and our unwillingness to examine realities, seem to him the fatal want in the land which he loves.

He detects one of the chief causes of this slack, good-humoured, and unthinking spirit, in the inheritance by individuals of immense quantities of unearned wealth. In consonance with the general tenor of his philosophy, he thinks that in most cases irresponsible wealth, especially when inherited in youth, dwarfs the growth of character and intellect by sheltering men unnaturally from the education of strife:—

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[1] *The Empty Purse.*

Behold the life at ease; it drifts.
The sharpened life commands its course.
She winnows, winnows roughly; sifts,
To dip her chosen in her source;
Contention is the vital force,
Whence pluck they brain, her prize of gifts.[1]

In the vulture period of life, when the world seems a prey to the young man, he should not be given the key to unlimited idleness and inconsiderate pleasure. Mr. Meredith denounces

Grandmotherly laws
Giving rivers of gold to our young,
In the days of their hungers impure;
To furnish them beak and claws,
And make them a banquet's lure.[2]

The rich, educated on these terms, do harm not only to themselves, their victims and their satellites, but to hosts of imitators. For they lead society, and therefore their want of ideals, their want of aim, their want of the sense of social service, their contempt for intellect, spread down among the professional and business classes who are climbing up the same ladder of wealth. The hero of Mr. Meredith's strange social and political *Sermon—The Empty Purse*, is such a one as this: a good fellow spoilt by inheriting wealth, but ultimately reclaimed by the loss of it. He appears first as

A Conservative youth! who the cream-bowl skimmed,
Desiring affairs to be left as they are.

---

[1] *Hard Weather.* [2] *The Empty Purse.*

But youth's right station, says Mr. Meredith, is in the ranks of change and generous experiment for the masses :—

> So, thou takest Youth's natural place in the fray,
> As a Tentative, combating Peace,
> Our lullaby word for decay.

His criticism of the golden youth of England is put into the mouth of the democratic German Professor, who lectures Harry Richmond, the unfortunate heir to broad acres and rich mines :—

'The Professor would invite me to his room, after the "sleep well," of the ladies, and I sat with him much like his pipe-bowl, which burned bright a moment at one sturdy puff, but generally gave out smoke in fantastical wreaths. He told me frankly he had a poor idea of my erudition. . . . One night he asked me what my scheme of life was. . . . "Have you no aim? You have, or I am told you are to have, fabulous wealth—a dragon's heap. You are one of the main drainpipes of English gold. What is your object? To spend it?"

'"I shall hope to do good with it."

'"To do good! There is hardly a prince or millionaire, in history or alive, who has not in his young days hugged that notion. Pleasure swarms, he has the pick of his market. You English live for pleasure."

'"We are the hardest workers in the world."

'"That you may live for pleasure! Dény it!"

'He puffed his tobacco-smoke zealously, and resumed; "Yes, you work hard for money. You eat and drink, and boast of your exercises; they sharpen your appetites. So goes the round. We strive, we fail; you are our frog-chorus of critics, and you suppose that your brek-ek-koax affects us. I say we strive and fail, but we strive on, while you remain in a past age, and are proud of it. You reproach us with lack of common sense, as if the belly were its seat. Now I ask you whether you have a scheme of life, that I may know whether you are to be another of those huge human pumpkins called rich men, who cover your country and drain its blood and intellect — those impoverishers of nature! Here we have our princes; but they are rulers, they are responsible, they have their tasks, and if they also run to gourds, the scandal punishes them and their order, all in seasonable time . . . bad enough!—bad enough! —but they are not protected by laws in their right to do nothing for what they receive. That system is an invention of the commercial genius and the English."'

Harry Richmond, in defence, cites our House of Lords.

'"We have our aristocracy, Herr Professor."'

But this only leads to another onslaught:—

'"Your nobles are nothing but rich men inflated with empty traditions of insufferable, because unwarrantable, pride, and drawing substance from

alliances with the merchant class. Are they your leaders? Do they lead you in letters? in the Arts? ay, or in Government? No, not, I am informed, not even in military service! and there our titled witlings do manage to hold up their brainless pates. You are all in one mass, struggling in the stream to get out and lie and wallow and belch on the banks. You work so hard that you have all but one aim, and that is fatness and ease!"'[1]

Thus while the English worship of wealth as the means of pleasure is a vital principle, a reality whether good or bad, on the other hand our English worship of rank, our snobbish interest in Lords and Dukes and their wives, is the worship of an unreality. There is no real aristocracy in England; yet the worship of an aristocracy of empty titles, purchased for the most part, overshadows the whole of English life and prevents us from devoting attention and thought to realities. This English worship of the shadow of deceased Norman feudality is held up to ridicule by Mr. Meredith in *Aneurin's Harp*, where he complains of the shame which he feels as a Welshman to see his conqueror the Saxon

> humbly cringing
> In a shadowy nose's shade.

The 'Norman nose' is the type of England's

[1] *Harry Richmond*, chap. xxix.

aristocracy — once a reality in the days of the Conqueror, now a title to gild wealth. He gives an historical epitome of our social evolution: first the Saxons subdued the Celts; but then

rose
Mightier rovers; they that planted
Sovereign here the Norman nose.

Glorious men, with heads of eagles,
Chopping arms, and cupboard lips;
Warriors, hunters, keen as beagles,
Mounted aye on horse or ships.
Active, being hungry creatures;
Silent, having nought to say:
High they raised the lord of features,
Saxon-worshipped to this day.

Hear its deeds, the great recital!
Stout as bergs of Arctic ice
Once it led, and lived; a title
Now it is, and names its price.
This our Saxon brothers cherish:
This, when by the worth of wits
Lands are reared aloft, or perish,
Sole illumes their lucre-pits.

Such is the history of the Norman nose!

But Mr. Meredith's patriotism as Welshman is merged in the larger patriotism of the Briton. The poem continues:—

Joined we are; a tide of races
Rolled to meet a common fate;
England clasps in her embraces
Many: what is England's state?

Somewhat too like the state of 'Mammon's wife,'

he says:—drunk with gold! And so we come to his warning to England of her danger, and his doctrine of imperial defence, based upon armaments, democratic laws, and, above all, on education:—

> Has she ears to take forewarnings
> She will cleanse her of her stains,
> Feed and speed for braver mornings
> Valorously the growth of brains.
> Power, the hard man knit for action,
> Reads each nation on the brow.
> Cripple, fool, and petrifaction,
> Fall to him—are falling now!

Ideas which politicians often divide, grow together in his mind. Beauchamp in his general spirit, though not in all his particular opinions, represents Mr. Meredith's democratic sympathies, his love of peace and liberty, coupled with his ardent anxiety for the strength of England's fighting forces. The fine and witty poem addressed to *Colonel Charles* shows that in 1887 he thought the country insufficiently armed. Since then, we have spent much money on her defences, but there may still be room for his warning that neither valour nor numbers are enough without 'brain.' Of *England before the Storm* he says:—

> She, impious to the Lord of Hosts,
> The valour of her offspring boasts,
> Mindless that now on land and main
> His heeded prayer is active brain.

And so—

> They stand to be her sacrifice,
> The sons this mother flings like dice,
> To face the odds and brave the Fates;
> As in those days of starry dates,
> When cannon cannon's counterblast
> Awakened, muzzle muzzle bowled,
> And high in swathe of smoke the mast
> Its fighting rag outrolled.

It is those days, which

> rolled the smoke from Trafalgar
> To darken Austerlitz ablaze,

that fill his heart with pride. And he thinks that every citizen to-day should know something of the use of arms.

It is defence, not conquest, of which Nelson is to him the symbol, and for which the citizen should prepare himself. We must be ready, because

> nations are
> Still the mad forces, tho' the scarred.

But wars and subjugations ought to be and shall be avoided as the world moves on. In the sonnet to his friend *J. M.*, whom it appears he wished to encourage in some work of pacification, he says:—

> Let Fate or Insufficiency provide
> Mean ends for men who what they are would be:
> Penned in their narrow day no change they see
> Save one which strikes the blow to brutes and pride.
> Our faith is ours and comes not on a tide:
> And whether Earth's great offspring, by decree,
> Must rot if they abjure rapacity,
> Not argument but effort shall decide.

At a later day, it is not surprising that his large-minded sanity saw that both sides were wrong in the Boer war; he held that both we and they were guilty of the blood stain. This opinion is expressed in the sonnet *At the Close*, written in the month of October 1899,[1] which ends with conditional prophecy as to the future.

No just man has used more severe words about England's faults, and no one at heart ever loved her better. In his novels a passionate patriotism, not of the shouting kind that would have its own merits advertised, is the peculiar characteristic of his English heroes, almost in proportion as they are his favourites. And if no one ever attacked the political, social, and intellectual shortcomings of our upper class more severely, no one ever depicted their mutual relations, their individual worth, their justice in dealing with dependants, and their out-of-door qualities, with more affectionate knowledge and distinguishing appreciation. He knows where they excel, because he knows where they fail. So too in his sketches of the middle and the working class, his ideal of the Englishman is of the much-enduring practical man, hearty and open, rough and tender, with his ounce of brain and his pound of saving humour, his readiness in the long run to take everything at

[1] *A Reading of Life*, p. 70.

its real worth, his instinct for fair play, and above all his world-famous old love of justice and of liberty. Mr. Meredith's youthful poem, *The Patriot Engineer*,[1] is written by one enamoured of this idea of his countrymen. To be a freedom-loving Englishman is to be

Of History's blood-royal.

In this, and in his other *Poems of the English Roadside*, we have the full freshness of the English spirit, whether as in *Juggling Jerry* it accepts, or as in *The Old Chartist* it rebels against, the state of things as they are. Will want of brain render all these fine qualities of no avail to solve the problems of the coming age? That is his question to the future, anxiously, hopefully asked.

His view of other countries, especially of France, is full of knowledge and of love.

In Continental politics he is strenuously on the side of freedom. Of all that great Englishmen wrote on behalf of the Italian cause against Austria, nothing is greater than the novel of *Vittoria*, nothing, even from Browning or Mr. Swinburne. The feeling is concentrated in her song sung on the boards of La Scala to the assembled thousands who were about to die for Italy :—

[1] Edition 1862, pp. 109-117.

'The Italians present, one and all, rose up reverently and murmured the refrain. . . . the curtain was agitated at the wings, but in the centre it was kept above Vittoria's head by the uplifted arms of the twelve young men.

I cannot count the years,
That you will drink, like me,
The cup of blood and tears,
Ere she to you appears :—
Italia, Italia shall be free!

'So the great name was out, and its enemies had heard it.

You dedicate your lives
To her, and you will be
The food on which she thrives,
Till her great day arrives :—
Italia, Italia shall be free!

She asks you but for faith!
Your faith in her takes she
As draughts of heaven's breath,
Amid defeat and death :—
Italia, Italia shall be free!

. . . .

I enter the black boat
Upon the wide grey sea,
Where all her set suns float,
Thence hear my voice remote :—
Italia, Italia shall be free!

'The curtain dropped.'[1]

Nothing is more characteristic alike of the generosity of Mr. Meredith's instincts and of the sanity of his outlook on events, than the poem which he

[1] *Vittoria*, chap. xxi.

wrote on *France, December* 1870. In that very month he wrote the poem, justifying the blow that felled her, yet praising and loving her none the less, prophesying her repentance, purification, and resurrection. The first verse puts the reader of to-day back into the minds of men as they read the news of that astonishing winter, when France disappeared from among the nations :—

> We look for her that sunlike stood
> Upon the forehead of our day,
> An orb of nations, radiating food
> For body and for mind alway.
> Where is the Shape of glad array ;
> The nervous hands, the front of steel,
> The clarion tongue ? Where is the bold proud face ?
> We see a vacant place ;
> We hear an iron heel.

The reticence with which the Prussian is treated throughout the poem is terrible :

> We hear an iron heel.

No more is said of him.

Then in the second verse there bursts out, most unexpectedly, a song of thanksgiving to France for what she did to liberate mankind in 1789. I know nothing in historical poetry more deeply moving than this verse written in December 1870 :—

> O she that made the brave appeal
> For manhood when our time was dark,
> And from our fetters drove the spark
> Which was as lightning to reveal

New seasons, with the swifter play
Of pulses, and benigner day;
She that divinely shook the dead
From living man; that stretched ahead
Her resolute forefinger straight,
And marched toward the gloomy gate
Of earth's Untried—

that was what no other country, not our England, not this iron Prussia, would ever do. Have finer words than those ever been written about the French Revolution? But alas! this France, who

gave note, and in
The good name of Humanity
Called forth the daring vision! she,
She likewise half corrupt of sin,
Angel and Wanton! can it be?
Her star has foundered in eclipse,
The shriek of madness on her lips:
Shreds of her, and no more, we see.
There is horrible convulsion, smothered din,
As of one that in a grave-cloth struggles to be free.
Look not for spreading boughs
On the riven forest tree.
Look down where deep in blood and mire,
Black thunder plants his feet and ploughs
The soil for ruin: that is France:
Still thrilling like a lyre,
Amazed to shivering discord from a fall
Sudden as that the lurid hosts recall
Who met in heaven the irreparable mischance.

All the characteristics of Mr. Meredith's style, and especially of his use of metaphor,[1] are illus-

[1] See pp. 9-14 above.

trated in this fine passage. And in the middle of this horror of grave-clothes, of blood, and the plough of ruin, France is

Still thrilling like a lyre.

To write that line is to understand the quality which distinguishes the French from the rest of us.

The poem continues to the end worthy of the opening. It is by no means entirely French in spirit; it points to the ethical laws which France had violated with such fatal results.[1] But it ends with an uncompromising avowal of faith in her recovery, and in her future as the instructress of mankind in Reason.

The deep interest that Mr. Meredith felt in this poem and its subject was shown when, a generation later, he republished it with three new poems of a like nature, but not of like merit, in the volume called *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History* (1898). The first two of these, *The Revolution*, and *Napoléon*, are somewhat too like a chaos of half-completed images. But out of the chaos, the ideas emerge with primitive strength when they emerge at all, and there is a movement like the march of armies in the general effect and rhythm

[1] I have quoted and discussed some of these passages above on pp. 128-131.

of the whole. The historical instinct with which he catches the spirit and point of each successive era in the Revolution and in Napoleon's career, may easily escape one who is not well read in the period, or not trained to elucidate Mr. Meredith's language.

The first of these poems opens with a picture of the *ancien régime*, before the great eruption :—

> Nor yet had History's Ætna smoked the skies.

France lay enchained :—

> Through marching scores of winters racked she lay,
> Beneath a hoar-frost's brilliant crust ;
> Whereon the jewelled flies that drained
> Her breasts disported in a glistering spray.

But the time was at hand, when

> For them that hungered, she was nourishing food,
> For those who sparkled, Night.

The central idea of this piece, as also of those that follow, is that in 1789 France rose midway to heaven to meet her bridegroom, descending from 'the blue.' This heavenly lover represents the true liberty, equality and fraternity, the ideas of '89 and of the Feast of Pikes. Throughout the history of the next hundred years she is always deserting this lover—for the Terror, or for either Napoleon—and seeking him again with tears. For she is wanton.

Of the Terror the poet says :—

> She drank what makes man demon at the draught.
> Her skies lowered black,
> Her lover flew,
> There swept a shudder over men.
> Her heavenly lover fled her, and she laughed,
> For laughter was her spirit's weapon then.
> The Infernal rose uncalled, he with his crew.
> As mighty thews burst manacles, she went mad :
> Her heart a flaring torch usurped her wits.

It was, indeed, her enemies within and without, who

> forced the cup to her lips when she drank blood.

Her peasant soldiers (stanza IX.) turn the tables on the confederate Kings (X.), and hunt the hunters. Then she should have remembered her heavenly bridegroom ; but the lust for victory, glory, plunder rose in her (XI.) at sight of the captured

> Banners from South, from East,
> Sheaves of pale banners drooping hole and shred ;
> The captive brides of valour.

And by them Napoleon won her heart.

> Banners from East, from South.
> She hugged him in them, feared the scourge they meant,
> Yet blindly hugged, and hungering built his throne.

And so we come to the poem on *Napoléon*—

> His eye the cannon's flame,
> The cannon's cave, his mind.

The Napoleonic roar filling Europe for twenty years is thus described :

> Europe for smithy, Europe's floor
> Lurid with sparks in evanescent showers,
> Loud echo-clap of hammers at all hours,
> Our skies the reflex of its furnace blast.

Napoleon is summed up in a series of phrases which give the very essence of the historical truth about

> Earth's chosen, crowned, unchallengeable upstart.

When he first appeared :—

> To weld the nation in a name of dread,
> And scatter carrion flies off wounds unhealed,
> The Necessitated came . . .
> Terrible with doubt,
> With radiance restorative. At one stride
> Athwart the Law he stood for sovereign sway.

In those early days of the Consulate he was

> . . . the reader of men, himself unread ;
> The name of hope, the name of dread ;
> Bloom of the coming years or blight.

In him were two men—the statesman and the despot—

> The statesman steered the despot to large tasks ;
> The despot drove the statesman on short roads.
> . . . . . .
> Within in his hot brain's hammering workshop hummed
> A thousand furious wheels at whirr, untired
> As Nature in her reproductive throes.

But within 'all his vast enginery' the human being showed a dwarf stature :—

> Hugest of engines, a much limited man.
> . . . . . .
> Enormous with no infinite around,
> No starred deep sky, no muse.

Napoleon was the opposite of France: he was

> Mannerless, graceless, laughterless, unlike
> Herself in all.

Therefore she loved him, but with a slave's love, not a wife's. And so, as the long, bloody years rolled over her, she still allowed

> Her supreme player of man's primæval game,

to call up 'the chivalry whereof he had none,' 'from his worn slave's abundant springs.'

During these long years of besotted slavery to Napoleon, France had often remembered her heavenly lover. The voice of her own humanity, 'Earth's fluttering little lyre,' had often stirred in her heart reminding her of him, singing of him, of liberty and reason. After Waterloo she was freed from the great oppression of Napoleon, but by foreigners who were not the sons of true freedom. She was not set free to return to her heavenly bridegroom:—

> The song of Liberty in her hearing spoke
> A foreign tongue; Earth's fluttering little lyre
> Unlike, but like the raven's ravening croak.

Such was the liberation of 1815, linked to the slavery of the Holy Alliance. The end of the poem leaves her in its grip.

Next in the volume comes the reprint of *France, December* 1870, which I have already discussed. And the story is completed in the fourth and last poem, *Alsace-Lorraine.* It is a failure,—the only failure in the book. But it is interesting to see how, at the close of the century, Mr. Meredith, referring to his poem *France, December* 1870, considers that his

> faith in her when she lay low

has been justified. The present and future which he sees for France is this :—

> Yet strong in arms, yet strong in self-control,
> Known valiant, her maternal throbs repressed,
> Discarding vengeance, Giant with a soul ;—
> . . . . . .
> The devotee of Glory, she may win
> Glory despoiling none, enrich her kind,
> Illume her land, and take the royal seat
> Unto the strong self-conqueror assigned.

George Meredith is the most modern, although he is the oldest, of our living poets. Whenever he is not in touch with the common ideas of our age, it is more often because he is still in front, than because he has been left behind. In his spirit we find a synthesis of many crude elements of latter-day thought. He has not failed, in his declining years, to understand the situation into which the

world has recently been moving; nor has his philosophy, in its war against pessimism, refused to take stock of the horrors and deficiencies of life as our realism now perceives it to be lived. In his poem of *Foresight and Patience*,[1] published by him at the age of seventy-three, he showed how keenly sensitive he is to modern developments, at least in their general outline, and how he conceives them to tally with his theory of progress.

The poem takes the form of a dialogue between Foresight, the active spirit of progress that aspires and plans and sometimes despairs, with her sister Patience, the spirit that waits in faith and 'savours hope deferred.'

> They rarely meet; one soars, one walks retired.
> When they do meet, it is our earth inspired.

Foresight is horror-struck by the gross, material aspect of the millions who are now so rapidly mastering the Earth :—

> My sister, as I read them in my glass,
> Their field of tares they take for pasture grass.
> How waken them that have not any bent
> Save browsing—the concrete indifferent!
> Friend Lucifer supplies them solid stuff:
> They fear not for the race when full the trough.
> They have much fear of giving up the ghost;
> And these are of mankind the unnumbered host.
> . . . . . .

---

[1] *Reading of Life* (1901), pp. 88-105.

> Admit some other features: Faithless, mean;
> Encased in matter; vowed to Gods obscene;
> Contemptuous of the impalpable, it swells
> On Doubt; for pastime swallows miracles;
> And if I bid it face what *I* observe,
> Declares me hoodwinked by my optic nerve!

Patience admits much of this charge. Knave and Fool are indeed numerous as locusts, and are now learning to 'drill'; they are organising under trained chiefs to conquer the world (pp. 96-97). But civilisation has survived many dangers before, and she will save herself again now—

> If men among the warnings that convulse
> Can gravely dread without the craven's pulse.

And, indeed, says Patience, there is safety and length of life for civilisation in the very multitude of these millions whose swarming vulgarity seems to endanger it:—

> To strengthen the foundations is the task
> Of this tough Age; not in your beams to bask.

Foresight confesses that there is truth in this consideration:—

> Greece was my lamp: burnt out for lack of oil;
> Rome, Python Rome, prey of its robber spoil!
> All structures built upon a narrow space
> Must fall, from having not your hosts for base.

And Patience sees new movements on foot, full of vast possibilities of good. The well-fed are no longer the only class conscious of life and power. 'Another mass,' 'the toilers,' the working class, is

'awake,' and is making itself heard by the classes in possession—

> Instructing them by their acutest sense,
> How close the dangers of indifference!

Even modern pessimism and melancholy, Patience says, are often a divine discontent, a refusal to accept the happiness that is for self alone while all around there is every form of misery. It is well that the age

> laughs at Happiness!

when happiness means 'our soul asleep and body's lust.' Men will now never again be content

> Until from warmth of many breasts, that beat
> A temperate common music, sunlike heat
> The happiness not predatory sheds!

In this spirit Mr. Meredith would have us view our age and work for it:—

> Ay, be we faithful to ourselves: despise
> Nought but the coward in us! That way lies
> The wisdom making passage through our slough.
> Am I not heard, my head to Earth shall bow;
> Like her, shall wait to see, and seeing wait.
> Philosophy is Life's one match for Fate.

The life in great cities, under present conditions, is not a good life for the mass of their inhabitants. But it is an error, says the poet of Earth, to regret the rural seclusion of past times. The best life

is that which is lived part in town and part in country.

> Not solitarily in fields we find
> Earth's secret open, though one page is there ;
> Her plainest, such as children spell, and share
> With bird and beast ; raised letters for the blind.
> Not where the troubled passions toss the mind,
> In turbid cities, can the key be bare.
> It hangs for those who hither thither fare,
> Close interthreading nature with our kind.[1]

It is not without significance for us that 'Earth's greatest,' Shakespeare, joined urban and pastoral in himself. In one of his last poems, called *Forest History*,[2] Mr. Meredith enlarges on the old romantic associations of man with the forest. They are described in the order of their historical happening in England. First, man's strife with the primæval wilderness—

> Old Earth's original Dragon ; there retired
> To his last fastness ;

and the taming of the savage woods (stanzas I.-VI.) ; then the monasteries and nunneries planted in the forest (VII.-XII.) ; then the feudal castle, and the knights errant tilting on the moss (XIII.-XVII.) ; then Robin Hood and the hunters of the deer (XVIII.-XXIII.), and the legends of fairies (XXIV.-XXV.). At the end of all came Shakespeare, who inherited each of these instincts and traditions,

[1] *Earth's Secret.*

[2] *Reading of Life* (1901), pp. 71-80.

back to the most primitive forest fear, but who was, besides, half townsman :—

> Came then the one, all ear, all eye, all heart ;
> Devourer, and insensibly devoured ;
> In whom the city over forest flowered,
> The forest wreathed the city's drama-mart.
> . . . . . .
> Now deep in woods, with song no sermon's drone,
> He showed what charm the human concourse works :
> Amid the press of men, what virtue lurks
> Where bubble sacred wells of wildness lone.

And so, as Shakespeare showed us, these two worlds of thought and feeling, the social and the solitary, may be woven together in our lives. They are 'our conquest,' we are told in the last verse of this difficult poem. The woods and the cities are in equal measure our inheritance, provided that we do not on the one hand, like some despairing prophets, lose respect for the advantages of civilisation, and retrogressively overstep

> Due boundaries of realms from Nature won ;

nor, on the other hand, become sophisticated out of all depth of feeling and allow the decline of 'the poet's awe in rapture,' which he first drew from the woodland, but may keep in the city.

CONCLUSION

I must now leave each reader to judge whether I have been to him of the slightest service, or only an offence, by throwing the shafts of a mechanical search-light among the stems and blossoming boughs of this vast, deep-rooted forest. It is impossible to summarise here the matters on which the discourse has run. They are too various and too profound. Mr. Meredith has treated them in prose and in verse, on one consistent plan of thought and feeling. His long life's work, which has been singularly of one piece, is drawing to a close. There is no judge competent to award degrees of supremacy among the rival great, but it is possible to try to show wherein the greatness of each consists. So I have argued that very rarely has there come among us a man so original, yet so sane, a spirit so new, yet so harmonious with the 'old heart of things.' I hope that by some at least this will be felt as something more than a wordy generalisation, half-truism, half-paradox. In proportion as my book has succeeded in its purpose, these verses, from *The Thrush in February*, will breathe familiar meanings. Mr. Meredith here renders account of his life, as it were, to posterity :—

Imbedded in a land of greed,
Of mammon-quakings dire as Earth's,
My care was but to soothe my need;
At peace among the little worths.

To light and song my yearning aimed;
To that deep breast of song and light
Which men have barrenest proclaimed;
As 'tis to senses pricked with fright.

So mine are these new fruitings rich
The simple to the common brings;
I keep the youth of souls who pitch
Their joy in this old heart of things:

Who feel the Coming young as aye,
Thrice hopeful on the ground we plough;
Alive for life, awake to die;
One voice to cheer the seedling Now.

Full lasting is the song, though he,
The singer, passes: lasting too,
For souls not lent in usury,
The rapture of the forward view.

With that I bear my senses fraught
Till what I am fast shoreward drives.
They are the vessel of the Thought.
The vessel splits the Thought survives.

APPENDIX

[It is a very great pleasure to me to be permitted by Mr. Meredith and his publishers to reprint this now famous *Ode*, at present only obtainable in the edition of 1862 and in the Limited Collected Edition of his works (vol. iii. of Poems). The first part of the poem, with its skilful changes of metre, its extraordinary rendering of the onrush and fury of the wind in the forest in a 'night of Pagan glee,' is highly illustrative of Mr. Meredith's style, as the latter part of the poem is of his thought.]

ODE TO THE SPIRIT OF EARTH IN AUTUMN

Fair Mother Earth lay on her back last night,
To gaze her fill on Autumn's sunset skies,
When at a waving of the fallen light,
Sprang realms of rosy fruitage o'er her eyes.
A lustrous heavenly orchard hung the West,
Wherein the blood of Eden bloomed again:
Red were the myriad cherub-mouths that pressed,
Among the clusters, rich with song, full fain,
But dumb, because that overmastering spell
Of rapture held them dumb: then, here and there,
A golden harp lost strings; a crimson shell
Burnt grey; and sheaves of lustre fell to air.
The illimitable eagerness of hue
Bronzed, and the beamy winged bloom that flew
'Mid those bunched fruits and thronging figures failed.
A green-edged lake of saffron touched the blue,
With isles of fireless purple lying through:
And Fancy on that lake to seek lost treasures sailed.

Not long the silence followed :
The voice that issues from the breast,
O glorious South-west,
Along the gloom-horizon holloa'd ;
Warning the valleys with a mellow roar
Through flapping wings ; then sharp the woodland bore
A shudder and a noise of hands :
A thousand horns from some far vale
In ambush sounding on the gale.
Forth from the cloven sky came bands
Of revel-gathering spirits ; trooping down,
Some rode the tree-tops ; some on torn cloud-str ps,
Burst screaming thro' the lighted town :
And scudding seaward, some fell on big ships :
Or mounting the sea-horses blew
Bright foam-flakes on the black review
Of heaving hulls and burying beaks.

Still on the farthest line, with outpuffed cheeks,
'Twixt dark and utter dark, the great wind drew
From heaven that disenchanted harmony
To join earth's laughter in the midnight blind :
Booming a distant chorus to the shrieks
Preluding him : then he,
His mantle streaming thunderingly behind,
Across the yellow realm of stiffened Day,
Shot thro' the woodland alleys signals three ;
And with the pressure of a sea,
Plunged broad upon the vale that under lay.

Night on the rolling foliage fell :
But I, who love old hymning night,
And know the Dryad voices well,
Discerned them as their leaves took flight,
Like souls to wander after death :
Great armies in imperial dyes,
And mad to tread the air and rise,
The savage freedom of the skies

To taste before they rot. And here,
Like frail white-bodied girls in fear,
The birches swung from shrieks to sighs;
The aspens, laughers at a breath,
In showering spray-falls mixed their cries,
Or raked a savage ocean-strand
With one incessant drowning screech
Here stood a solitary beech,
That gave its gold with open hand,
And all its branches, toning chill,
Did seem to shut their teeth right fast
To shriek more mercilessly shrill,
And match the fierceness of the blast.

But heard I a low swell that noised
Of far-off ocean, I was 'ware
Of pines upon their wide roots poised,
Whom never madness in the air
Can draw to more than loftier stress
Of mournfulness not mournfulness,
Not mournfulness, but Joy's excess,
That singing, on the lap of sorrow faints:
And Peace, as in the hearts of saints
Who chant unto the Lord their God;
Deep Peace below upon the muffled sod,
The stillness of the sea's unswaying floor.
Could I be sole there not to see
The life within the life awake;
The spirit bursting from the tree,
And rising from the troubled lake?
Pour, let the wines of Heaven pour!
The Golden Harp is struck once more,
And all its music is for me!
Pour, let the wines of Heaven pour!
And, ho, for a night of Pagan glee!

There is a curtain o'er us.
For once, good souls, we'll not pretend

To be aught better than she who bore us,
And is our only visible friend.
Hark to her laughter! who laughs like this,
Can she be dead, or rooted in pain?
She has been slain by the narrow brain,
But for us who love her she lives again.
Can she die? O, take her kiss!

The crimson-footed nymph is panting up the glade,
With the wine-jar at her arm-pit, and the drunken ivy-braid
Round her forehead, breasts, and thighs: starts a Satyr, and they speed:
Hear the crushing of the leaves: hear the cracking of the bough!
And the whistling of the bramble, the piping of the weed!

But the bull-voiced oak is battling now:
The storm has seized him half-asleep,
And round him the wild woodland throngs
To hear the fury of his songs,
The uproar of an outraged deep.
He wakes to find a wrestling giant
Trunk to trunk and limb to limb,
And on his rooted force reliant,
He laughs and grasps the broadened giant,
And twist and roll the Anakim;
And multitudes acclaiming to the cloud,
Cry which is breaking, which is bowed.

Away, for the cymbals clash aloft
In the circles of pine, on the moss-floor soft.
The nymphs of the woodland are gathering there,
They huddle the leaves, and trample, and toss;
They swing in the branches, they roll in the moss,
They blow the seed on the air.
Back to back they stand and blow
The winged seed on the cradling air,
A fountain of leaves over bosom and back.
The pipe of the Faun comes on their track,

And the weltering alleys overflow
With musical shrieks and wind-wedded hair
The riotous companies melt to a pair.
Bless them, mother of kindness!

A star has nodded through
The depths of the flying blue.
Time only to plant the light
Of a memory in the blindness.
But time to show me the sight
Of my life thro' the curtain of night;
Shining a moment, and mixed
With the onward-hurrying stream,
Whose pressure is darkness to me;
Behind the curtain, fixed,
Beams with endless beam
That star on the changing sea.

Great Mother Nature! teach me, like thee,
To kiss the season and shun regrets.
And am I more than the mother who bore,
Mock me not with thy harmony!
Teach me to blot regrets,
Great Mother! me inspire
With faith that forward sets
But feeds the living fire.
Faith that never frets
For vagueness in the form.
In life, O keep me warm!

For, what is human grief?
And what do men desire?
Teach me to feel myself the tree,
And not the withered leaf.
Fixed am I and await the dark to-be!

And O, green bounteous Earth!
Bacchante Mother! stern to those
Who live not in thy heart of mirth;

Death shall I shrink from, loving thee?
Into the breast that gives the rose,
Shall I with shuddering fall?

Earth, the mother of all,
Moves on her steadfast way,
Gathering, flinging, sowing.
Mortals, we live in her day,
She in her children is growing.

She can lead us, only she,
Unto God's footstool, whither she reaches:
Loved, enjoyed, her gifts must be,
Reverenced the truths she teaches,
Ere a man may hope that he
Ever can attain the glee
Of things without a destiny!

She knows not loss:
She feels but her need,
Who the winged seed
With the leaf doth toss.

And may not men to this attain?
That the joy of motion, the rapture of being,
Shall throw strong light when our season is fleeing,
Nor quicken aged blood in vain,
At the gates of the vault, on the verge of the plain?
Life thoroughly lived is a fact in the brain,
While eyes are left for seeing.
Behold, in yon stripped Autumn, shivering grey,
Earth knows no desolation.
She smells regeneration
In the moist breath of decay.

Prophetic of the coming joy and strife,
Like the wild western war-chief sinking
Calm to the end he eyes unblinking,
Her voice is jubilant in ebbing life.

He for his happy hunting-fields,
Forgets the droning chant, and yields
His numbered breaths to exultation
In the proud anticipation:
Shouting the glories of his nation,
Shouting the grandeur of his race,
Shouting his own great deeds of daring:
And when at last death grasps his face,
And stiffened on the ground in peace
He lies with all his painted terrors glaring;
Hushed are the tribe to hear a threading cry
Not from the dead man;
Not from the standers-by:
The spirit of the red man
Is welcomed by his fathers up on high.

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